

ESSAY

# “Forging a New Language”: A New Spatiotemporal Logic in James Baldwin’s *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*

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## Abstract

This article examines James Baldwin’s late text *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) as one of his substantial attempts at “forging a new language,” which he tentatively mentions in his late essays and interviews. As an unpopular and difficult text in Baldwin’s oeuvre, *Evidence* carries the imprint of a new economy of time, casting the past into the present, and a new economy of space, navigating across other geographies in appraising the serial killings of children in one of Atlanta’s poorest Black neighborhoods. This article suggests that a new economy of time emerges earlier in *No Name in the Street* (1972), as a result of Baldwin’s self-imposed exile in Europe. The article then analyzes his spatiotemporal logic in the specifics of *Evidence* with reference to a Black middle class, urbanization, the ghetto, gentrification, and other colonized spaces.

**Keywords:** Atlanta child murders, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, spatiotemporality, internationalism, innocence, ghetto, gentrification, Black middle class

As James Baldwin lived in Europe for three decades, he not only witnessed those societies as they grappled with their own demons, but he also observed the faces of historically rooted racism and the social structures it bore. The perspective of "transatlantic commuter," or exile, impelled him to an unusual witness position where language itself became a trap, tilting toward prescription and dictating narrow ideological possibilities. Baldwin sought to expose the entrenched assumptions that fuel colonialism and racism from a global perspective. He targeted the morality of American economics and power by dismantling their foundations. This was at the same time a recovery project, salvaging those who vanished in the course of that power acquisition and granting them a body politic. What critics generally put as Baldwin's failing craft might, instead, be a manifestation of his growing impatience with predetermined narrative structures and their binding ideologies.

As his writing life is marked by many exiles and returns, Baldwin seems to be more and more interested in the organization of thoughts and images that plague Black people's self-knowledge. In his essays from the late 1970s and early 1980s, notably "On Language, Race, and the Black Writer" and "Notes on the House of Bondage," and two of his final interviews, Baldwin mentions "a new language," which he believes is urgent.<sup>1</sup> Speaking with Quincy Troupe, Baldwin repeats his conviction twice that "no true account of Black life can be contained in the American vocabulary."<sup>2</sup> On another occasion, he admits that he is "semicoherent" about a new language, except for the fact that it is also "a new morality ... on all levels—the level of color, the level of identity, the level of sexual identity, what love means, especially in a consumer society, for example. Everything is in question, according to me."<sup>3</sup> Considering the frequency with which Baldwin puts language at stake in this period, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) is an appropriate text to look for his inquiry. This article seeks to analyze the mode of writing in *Evidence* whereby Baldwin aims to throw "everything ... in question," in order to argue that Baldwin's "new language" amounts to a new understanding of geography and history, a novel spatiotemporal logic.

The case of the missing children in Atlanta, Georgia, in the late 1970s caught nationwide attention, and the media sought Baldwin's reflections as an elder civil rights figure. Reluctantly accepting Walter Lowe's offer as editor of *Playboy* magazine to write an essay on the subject, Baldwin came to Atlanta early in 1981. *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* appeared as an essay in 1981 in *Playboy* and was later expanded into a book with the same title. Turned down by Baldwin's long-standing American publisher, Dial, the book came out first in France (Editions Stock), and in England (Michael Joseph), before being published in the US by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1985.<sup>4</sup> It enjoyed a second edition by the same company's subsidiary, Owl Books (Henry Holt and Company), in 1995 with a foreword by Derrick Bell (with Janet Dewart Bell), setting it in a legal scholar's perspective. The text is among Baldwin's works to have received the poorest critical attention, and it lacks diligent editing.<sup>5</sup> In addition, its unruly structure seems to contain asides, footnotes, and marginalia carried into the main body. The proper subject matter, that

is, the Atlanta child murder case, is repeatedly recontextualized from several historical and global perspectives.

When it was published, *Evidence* received few reviews, most of them negative on the grounds that the text was neither journalism nor a legal case study in the proper sense. Scholarship, on the other hand, has been almost nonexistent for decades. This critical silence applied not only to *Evidence* but also his later work in general, until the 2000s. One of the early mixed remarks belongs to James A. Snead, who observes “a few stylistic lapses” in *Evidence*.<sup>6</sup> He explains that the New Right and the new racism of the Reagan era, in addition to “the amorphous nature of the case itself” must have distracted him, but Snead further observes “the consistency of Baldwin’s witness” against “the intransigence of his listeners.”<sup>7</sup> The disagreement between Baldwin’s principal biographers, David Leeming and James Campbell, concerning *Evidence* is worth noting. Leeming locates the text historically as a companion piece to *The Fire Next Time*: “*Evidence* was to the aftermath of the ‘civil rights’ movement what *The Fire Next Time* had been to its heyday.”<sup>8</sup> Campbell, on the other hand, thinks that it was too much given to groundless conspiracy, and that in the expansion of the essay of 6,000 words into a book of 60,000 words, Baldwin “had found nothing more to say.”<sup>9</sup> A recent interview shows that Campbell retains these views, and further argues that the critical reception of Baldwin’s later works remains “meretricious.”<sup>10</sup> No matter how unruly it is, or poorly edited, *Evidence* is a rare publication not only in Baldwin’s oeuvre, but also in the sense that it contains an uncompromising anticolonial critique at a time of neoliberal triumphalism.

In the 1980s, Baldwin was able to see the world that was being constructed during the post-civil rights era with catchphrases such as *the new world order* and *globalization*. The intellectual climate of the 1980s was dominated by underhanded racism, ahistorical parochialism, toxic complacency, jingoism, monolingualism, political myopia, and (academic) careerism. Responding to the public’s desire to hear about the achievements of racial equality, the media sent optimistic messages about the Reagan era, but Baldwin kept reminding readers of the still unaccomplished promises and continued racist oppression. His historically informed, nuanced politics fell out of fashion. If, as this article suggests, *Evidence* is an instance of a new language in the making, it is all the more compelling to witness Baldwin experimenting with a new economy of time and space. This new language finds its expression in a discursive structure where Baldwin weaves several spatio-temporal ties to form a body of knowledge.

I join other scholars who have recently looked anew at *Evidence*. Notably, Jonathan Eburne comments that this text is more of an “intensification” rather than an “exhaustion” of its author’s “characteristically paralectical mode of writing.”<sup>11</sup> Richard Shur examines the ways in which language and racialized perception function in legal discourse. Bill Schwarz addresses Baldwin’s formal choices in this late text in the context of a post-civil rights era when violence and terror continued in different guises. Joseph Vogel locates Baldwin’s text in conjunction with the neoliberal policies of the Reagan era. D. Quentin Miller foregrounds in Baldwin’s

writing—as well as in his life—a continuous preoccupation with a racialized legal system, criminalization, and incarceration. Miller argues that Baldwin's initial emotions of fear and rage about the US legal system evolve into "a sense of autonomy, transcendence above the law's force, and empowerment through the development of a voice that blends the sensibility of a literary artist with the authoritative rhetoric of a lawyer."<sup>12</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr. sees *Evidence* as a befitting meditative dimension in Baldwin's larger oeuvre, evidence of his continued attempt to "do first works over."<sup>13</sup> Courtney Thorsson, in her article on the ways in which the Atlanta child murders occupy the African American literary imagination, observes that Baldwin destabilizes linear time and official narratives. She defines the text as a "jeremiad," and notes that it "uses shifts in geographical and temporal scope and oscillates between abstract and concrete subjects," making it difficult to categorize as a case study.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to these invaluable treatments that salvage the text's merits, there are two instances of critical reception that examine the workings of *Evidence* against ideological and commercial structures, in its own day and beyond. The issue of how American cultural policy institutionalizes and commodifies African American literature, especially during and after the Cold War, is closely related to the rationale behind studying such an unpopular text as *Evidence* by such a well-known author as Baldwin. Robert Reid-Pharr observes "a certain flat-footed pragmatism" and "clumsiness" in *Evidence*.<sup>15</sup> He emphasizes Baldwin's attempt to speak bluntly from the disturbing site of suppressed terror at a time of official triumphalism in which Black votes had the power to appoint Black administrations. Baldwin's impolite straightforwardness is what Reid-Pharr argues to be the "proof of the text's being uniquely capable of speaking to difficulties that beset us as students and critics of 'domestic' fictions produced in increasingly globalized, alienated, 'strange' contexts."<sup>16</sup> The circulation of capital along old imperial routes, the cartographies of wealth, and the benefits thereof operate at such a distance and in such complicated ways that they escape public consciousness. The geographies of abuse grow distant, incomprehensible, and thus meaningless in the eyes of the public. Reid-Pharr points to this paradox when he detects these "strange contexts" as constitutive of home-grown myths of national self. As the "new world order" was launched, Baldwin's intervention was necessary to reveal the imperialist inventory of "domestic fictions."

Examining the basis of the intellectual climate of the mid-1980s, Ricardo Wilson observes "an absolute disregard for the market forces" in Baldwin's composition.<sup>17</sup> With many Black writers being widely read, rewarded, and included in the American canon—including Baldwin himself—during the 1980s, the publishing market seemed to permit only a specific type of Black literature. Wilson further suggests that Baldwin's views were, and still are, unmarketable precisely because he planted history firmly into the present, and thus *Evidence*, as "a statement that appropriately and eloquently challenges the foundations of our present moment, has been unfairly or willfully ignored."<sup>18</sup> By historicizing the defects in the much-applauded official narratives about democracy, Baldwin exposes the continuity of white

supremacist practice, and deliberately steps out of his day's celebrated type of Black literature. The domestic fictions of triumphalism, produced out of the civil struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, viciously contrasted with the normalization of systemic violence and exploitation. Baldwin's point was to address the serial killings of children of poor families at such a time of national complacency.

During the 1950s, however, Baldwin's critique of the American social system was not readily international and anticolonial. Christopher Winks points to the ambivalence and hesitancy that Baldwin felt about his relationship to Africa at this early stage, but interprets this hesitant moment as a turning point which evolved later: "Questions of culture, as Baldwin observes with decidedly mixed feelings, rapidly metamorphosed into political questions in an impassioned dialectical movement."<sup>19</sup> Begüm Adalet, however, views Baldwin as "a consistent comparativist," and notes the unfolding of the artist's inquiry as he unremittingly measured several geographically different forms of oppression and colonialism against each other:

His encounters with difference abroad became a source for critical self-reflection and social criticism, as well as a foundation from which he increasingly engaged in a conjoined assault on imperialism and domestic racism, employing a comparative method that put their victims on the same plane, while retaining their particularities.<sup>20</sup>

This difficult critical position demands an inquiry about the extent to which concepts and practices can be translated, as well as an openness to encounters. The multiplicity of variables with too many unknowns of cultural difference demand deciphering, toning, and tuning; and Baldwin subscribed to this layered difficulty, despite the fact that he sometimes was "weary and depressed and weary of new places" and the uneasy sense of exile.<sup>21</sup>

As early as the beginning of the 1960s, homeland, diaspora, nation-building, and decolonization—affected by the US—came to occupy Baldwin's thinking. Even a text as classically American as *Fire Next Time* harbors diasporic elements. Emphasizing the fact that the writing of the essay coincided with Baldwin's planned visits to the West African countries and Israel on a commission, Kevin Birmingham notes that "Africa and Israel [lurk] in the margins of the essay."<sup>22</sup> In his letter to the editor, dated February 1962, Baldwin records his uneasiness about the "African book," sensing that he is "pregnant with some strange monster."<sup>23</sup> As Baldwin visited Israel and Africa, he grappled with the idea of the "African book" that was never written. While in Israel, he came to think of the borders within the country which separate Jews and Arabs. His grammar that contains these troubled feelings, which he describes in his letter—dated October 5, 1961—as "undisciplined," can stand as a trope for the manner of writing in *Evidence*, too. This particularly winding sentence is soaked in personal and collective history:

In a curious way, since [Israel] *does* function as a homeland, however beleaguered, you can't walk five minutes without finding yourself at a border, can't talk to anyone

for five minutes without being reminded first of the mandate (British), then of the war—and of course the entire Arab situation, outside the country, and, above all, within, causes one to take a view of human life and right and wrong almost as stony as the land in which I presently find myself—well, to bring this thoroughly undisciplined sentence to a halt, the fact that Israel is a homeland for so many Jews (there are great faces here; in a way the whole world is here) causes me to feel my own homelessness more keenly than ever.<sup>24</sup>

Baldwin's confusions about homeland, homelessness, and his observations of the colonial traces that tyrannized people on other continents weighed on him so much that he quickly accepted his actor friend Engin Cezzar's invitation for a short stay in İstanbul, where he finished writing *Fire Next Time*. By providing an unusual angle from which to see the US influence at work, Turkey can well be included to expand Birmingham's observation about the presence of Israel and Africa in this text. On his unplanned stop in Turkey, Baldwin was able to drop the issues of homeland and homelessness for a while. But even there, as he wrote in his letter, "the whole somber question of America's role in the world today stared at me in a new and inescapable way, and the question of America's role brings up, of course, the question of what the role of the American Negro is, or can be."<sup>25</sup> In his deepest contemplations, he discovered that "journalistic skill" was not enough to cover the "African book," and that the only way to deal with it was in "a dangerously personal way [making] the reader ask his own questions and make his own assessments."<sup>26</sup>

Written in Turkey, and published in the US in 1972, *No Name in the Street* displays the maturation of Baldwin's internationalism as reflected in his challenges to temporal linearities and all-too-expected ideological narratives and alignments. Examining the literary work Baldwin produced at this time, Magdalena Zaborowska explains that "as his own world widens, Baldwin's narrator becomes more aware of the chains of racism binding Europe, Africa, and both Americas, and the prisons that Western civilization has built as much on several continents as in the minds of both its victims and perpetrators and beneficiaries."<sup>27</sup> From the Turkish corner, Baldwin came to see that Anglo-European self-knowledge led to a "malevolent poverty of spirit," blinding the colonizer to the various forms of dispossession on the part of the colonized.<sup>28</sup> Toward the end of *No Name*, Baldwin's ruminations about the interconnections between racism and colonialism in other geographies center on the ownership and management of land. Laying bare the historical mechanisms of colonial dispossession and movement of capital, Baldwin points to the necessity to reconsider political alliances and transnational solidarities: "Any real commitment to black freedom in this country would have the effect of reordering all our priorities, and altering all our commitments."<sup>29</sup> Supporting the Black freedom fighters in South Africa and Angola, allegiance with Cuba, and with Arab nations rather than Israel, he contends, will provide a reorientation of the moral compass, which would effectuate not only an anti-imperialist but also an anti-capitalist trajectory: "Such a course would forever wipe the smile from the

face of that friend we all rejoice to have at Chase Manhattan.”<sup>30</sup> This “reordering of priorities” is in conjunction with Black liberation since the way the colonized are abused in military and economic terms corresponds to the ways in which African Americans are racialized, commodified, and criminalized in the US.

A new chronometrics that would be the key for the new language is to be found in the passage where in *No Name*, Baldwin reflects on the structure of time, with leaps forward and backward, conjuring multiple images at once:

I suspect that there really has been some radical alteration in the structure, the nature of time. One may say that there are no clear images; everything seems superimposed on, and at war with something else. There are no clear vistas: the road that seems to pull one forward into the future is also pulling one backward into the past.<sup>31</sup>

The passage at first evokes Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history,” who looks back, astonished at “the piling wreckage upon wreckage ... hurl[ed] ... at his feet.”<sup>32</sup> The angel wishes to awaken the dead and undo the damage, but cannot because he is caught in the storm and pushed into the future “while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky.”<sup>33</sup> In Benjamin’s reading of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, the past crimes, which prefigure future crimes, demand to be addressed. Without due redemption, however, the unrelieved tension is transmitted to the future. Appointing himself as a witness from an early point in his engaged life, Baldwin is like Benjamin’s angel of history, caught in the vortex of images coming from memory and imagined futures. At this point in his writing, a material and ethical sense of history makes itself manifest.

Mikko Tuhkanen comments that an “intensified *time-consciousness*” is central to Baldwin’s writing.<sup>34</sup> Tuhkanen explains that the time sense prompts an “ethico-political” stance, since it is constitutive of a body of knowledge that would impact the present and future: “Time’s passing issues an ethical demand, a call to responsibility that, as [Baldwin] insists, has gone unheeded in the modern world.”<sup>35</sup> Tuhkanen identifies Baldwin’s time-consciousness as “chronoethics” to mean a sense of time that demands a redemptive confrontation in the present moment, locating the past in the present. When Tuhkanen’s concept of “chronoethics” is applied to *No Name* and *Evidence*, the ethical motive behind Baldwin’s “forging a new language” becomes more recognizable. Against a linearly flowing time as a pacifier of pain, Baldwin restructures time in terms of “superimposed” “images” that are irreconcilable, “at war with each other,” providing no comfort and “no clear vistas,” activating contemplation and resistance to easy consolations. Baldwin made this measure of time possible in a new narrative whereby he attacked self-assured imperialisms. What majestically unfolds in *Evidence* is a meticulous deconstruction of American narratives of innocence and post-civil rights era progress.

Before going into analysis of *Evidence*, it is useful to lay out the unfolding of the event, which drew Baldwin to expand his work from the limits of the commissioned essay into a monograph. By 1974, like a few other cities such as Cleveland,

OH, Gary, IN, and Newark, NJ, Atlanta boasted an African American mayor-elect, which was celebrated as the triumph of the civil rights struggle, indicated in its motto, “the city too busy to hate.” The construction of the airport and other infrastructure provided job opportunities, and the city thrived economically from conventions and business tourism. The consequent emergence of the African American middle class stood as a confirmation of upward mobility, and a redemption of the South’s dark past. Atlanta was celebrated as a progressive and safe city; however, chronic poverty and street violence persisted as an economic crisis deepened. In this climate of social crisis, several Black youths were reported to be missing in the vicinity of poor neighborhoods located in the metropolitan area. Although the event was a present-day phenomenon, it readily evoked the South’s dark past. Eric Gary Anderson explains the ways in which criminal traumatic events have been inscribed in African American collective memory: “Suffused by African American common knowledge of larger southern cultural and criminal histories ... home converges with and comes to seem inseparable from various physical places—urban ecologies—that have become, or could become, scenes of crimes against blacks.”<sup>36</sup> The discovery of the dead bodies of children and youths in the ghetto from 1979 to 1981 turned the missing children cases into murder investigations, divulging the city’s white supremacist DNA.

It took officials almost half a year to link the murders of children and teenagers as serial, a recognition for which Camille Bell, the mother of the murdered Yousef Bell turned activist, struggled.<sup>37</sup> Media coverage triggered a nationwide campaign, led by several celebrities, to provide financing for the investigation, “buck-dancing on the graves,” as one of Baldwin’s interviewees cynically put it in *Evidence*.<sup>38</sup> Terrion L. Williamson argues that the number of deaths, instead of a concern for the lives, lay at the bottom of public attention in Atlanta: “Violence begets value, and the publicity attends not to the lives that were lived but to the savagery that made those lives available for public consumption in the first place.”<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Joseph Vogel emphasizes the televised nature of the attention, the event coinciding with the rise of cable news.<sup>40</sup> Public attention was motivated more by commercialization than compassion, evincing a nationwide mediated obsession with images of (Black) death and destruction.

With the involvement of the FBI, a new list of murdered children and a new narrative were introduced to the case.<sup>41</sup> Instigated by the FBI, the fiber analysis method—referred to as “fiber evidence” in Baldwin’s text—removed the interrogation from its human and socio-economic context to a purely scientific level. This technocratic methodology drastically altered the possible connections and stories in the minds of the afflicted community. The investigation eventually discovered an African American male suspect, Wayne Williams, and convicted him on fiber evidence. Interestingly, Williams was convicted only for the murder of two adults (ages twenty-one and twenty-seven) among the twenty-eight murders of children, which were attributed to him without a thorough examination.<sup>42</sup> A Black murderer killing Black individuals, as the sanctioned narrative argued, signaled a shift in the patterns of racism in the post-civil rights era, hitherto unimaginable in



African American collective memory. This shift was from racism in physically violent, public terms to subtly institutionalized and legitimized terms. Political machines—criminal law, economy, and urban infrastructure—operated in such a way as to produce structural racism in which Black elected officials had to collude in order to secure their prestigious positions.<sup>43</sup> Thus the accusation of Wayne Williams verified, for the officials, the race–crime causality, and also enabled the now biracial ruling class to wash its hands of responsibility for the systemic and multiple injustices that caused Black children’s deaths. The FBI’s fiber evidence further added an ironic twist to the case, failing to “weave” these murders into a meaningful whole, and on top of that undoing “the social fabric” to which Baldwin refers frequently in his text. As far as the FBI was concerned, the case proved the triumph of the “cutting-edge investigative machinery as well as its implicit color-blindness.”<sup>44</sup>

American legal history provides many examples where those who inflicted violence on African Americans were determined to be “not guilty.”<sup>45</sup> In the eyes of the public, the city of Atlanta was vindicated, as one local journalist put it: “Atlanta ... stood trial before a doubting world and was judged. Not guilty. Not guilty.”<sup>46</sup> The city “too busy to hate” was absolved of this murderous episode, and the trial provided “the hygiene of the State.”<sup>47</sup> The historical complexity of the event was reduced to the question of whether or not “the city,” a symbol for the South and American society at large, still grappled with white supremacy or not. In this logic, the Black criminal saved the reputation of the city, its administration, and the State. The case was delivered from being “a race issue.” The question of pattern was applied to the murder methods—which was not convincing for the public—but not to the socio-economic status of the victims. The FBI was concerned more with building a *tour-de-force* story around a suspect, based on evidence revealed by state-of-the-art technology. For Baldwin, this was a revelation of “the cowardice of this time and place,” fingering “a single demented creature or ... creatures ... who must be murdered or locked up.”<sup>48</sup> It was also like “attempting to explain Hitler away.”<sup>49</sup> He further comments that, “for the State, his guilt or innocence is a matter of convenience.”<sup>50</sup> Writing his own verdict, Baldwin addresses the Black underclass to whom he feels responsible: “But, for us, this question—involving, as it does, complicity—must be more urgent and more personal.”<sup>51</sup> The challenge, he proposes, is to recognize the illusion in this official narrative.

Stripping the whole narration built around an arbitrarily suspicious Wayne Williams, Baldwin targets the silence produced by terror in the hearts of the children and their families. As a writer and a witness, he obeys the calls that come from the cracks of the ruin: “A writer is never listening to what is being said ... what he is being told. He is listening to what is *not* being said ... *not* being told ... to discover the purpose of the communication.”<sup>52</sup> For Baldwin, the writer’s quarrel is with the given reality, the basic tool of which is language. Atlanta’s children vanish in the textual structure and vocabulary that supposedly explain the murder case. However, Baldwin undertakes, by “forging a new language,” to salvage their unwritten experience, and inscribe that multilayered story on the vaults of American consciousness.

If part of the writer's call is to "listen to what is *not* being said," part of it is to discover what violence a surface benevolence disguises. In opposition to the complacent narrative of the civil rights era as a succession of victories, Baldwin looks back at the same era and sees that "the triumph was also a delusion."<sup>53</sup> He understands the legal achievements as a "cosmetic job," hardly more than an arrangement to maintain the status quo.<sup>54</sup> He measures the dues paid in terms of the advances gained. It is known that during this period, Baldwin was also working on a manuscript entitled "Remember This House," which was a meditation on the civil rights movement and the constant losses of his friends. As the State was building monuments in the name of democracy and its "martyrs," the struggle, for Baldwin, was never a *fait accompli*—the dead children of Atlanta being the evidence that it was not so. Looking back, Baldwin insisted on using the vocabulary that he believed to be accurate, defining the civil rights struggle as "the Black insurrection":

Nor was it as clear as it was, shortly, to become that the Republic, having fought and sustained the separation of the races for so long, would transform the visible—as distinguished from the real—results of the Black insurrection into a propaganda medal for itself. Our presence, "downtown," resounded throughout the globe as proof that the leader of the "free" world was uncompromisingly devoted to freedom.<sup>55</sup>

It is also remarkable that Baldwin was able to see the way the State's narrative operated both at home and abroad. On the international level, the civil rights struggle was distorted as Cold War propaganda, since the State was at pains to convince the rest of the world that it was a working democracy. Baldwin was interested in the reality of colonized geographies that this propaganda obscured. The gaze outside of the national borders provided him with a deeper comprehension of African American experience as a part of interconnected colonialisms. As *Evidence* demonstrates, the issue of the murdered children in Atlanta, for Baldwin, was not an isolated case but a refiguration of larger Western colonialism. He proposes that "if one really wishes to know how highly this Republic esteems Black freedom, one has only to watch the American performance in the world."<sup>56</sup> He insists that "the situation of the Black American 'minority' connects with the situation of the so-called 'emerging' or 'Third World' nations" on the grounds that colonialism and slavery are just two faces of the same operation.<sup>57</sup> A critical gaze at American foreign policy demands a challenge to geographical frames of reference such as "Third World," "the Middle East," or "Africa," reducing the myriad cultures, languages, and histories under single markers. Being exposed to those geographies and cultures under various circumstances, Baldwin understands the differences and nuances that are deliberately obscured and alienated from the American public. Baldwin's argument about the history and role of Israel is complementary to his internationalism, though it extends beyond the scope of this article.<sup>58</sup> Finding themselves in the pre-structured economic relations serving Western interests, the "emerging" nations, Baldwin knows from careful observation, were doomed

to remain as such. In his close-up of the South African miner who is forever excluded from the benefit scheme of his labor, Baldwin reminds readers that South African economic and political power emanates from wealth extraction,

exporting, hourly, daily, tons of gold and diamonds and minerals, extorted out of the flesh of their Black slaves. And to whom is this plunder exported? To those who can pay for it, and it can be paid for only in the currency of the West. The source of this currency being, to put it kindly, cheap labor, those who produce it can never hope to benefit from it. It is locked in the vaults of other cities, and at the disposal of another people.<sup>59</sup>

The intermeshed motion of domestic and global colonialisms is most remarkably articulated in *Evidence* when Baldwin adjusts time according to Martin Luther King's wristwatch, given to him by Coretta Scott King, on which are King's face and the words *I Have a Dream*.<sup>60</sup> As the only measure of time Baldwin trusts, he riffs on King's "I Have a Dream" speech, taking giant temporal leaps and manifesting his own chronoethics. Like a vortex, Baldwin's line of thought is sucked into the deeper layers of collective and personal memory, the bombings in Alabama, and then into his present, as he attends a court meeting when "a certain J. B. Stoner" was tried for the bombings to pay lip service to justice. Baldwin's progression continues with colonialisms, old and new, until he stops time to anchor the narrative in cash crop economy:

The Republic can bring ruinous pressure to bear on Central America (*mare nostrum!*) but the Black South African slave will simply have to wait—as we have. Until the hour that the sweat of his brow—the delivery of the cash crop—is no longer needed and he can be dispatched, discreetly, or otherwise, to his ancestors.<sup>61</sup>

The full line of thought, punctuated and broken, superimposes various localities shaped by the lives and afterlives of slavery and colonialism. In Baldwin's semiosis, the economy of cash crops and disposable bodies repeatedly appears at different times, on different continents as signifiers of the same colonizing motion. This gives a syncopation effect to the narrative, an exhaustive but nevertheless breathtaking polyrhythm of thought, which demands the utmost attention from the reader. Baldwin indeed forges new spatiotemporal connections that position "the Afro-American in a stunning and vertiginous place."<sup>62</sup>

This "stunning and vertiginous place" also corresponds to actual spatial formations. Racial stratification in the United States produces a Black middle class, the nucleus of which is, in Baldwin's view, the "captive population" of the ghetto.<sup>63</sup> *Captive population* is a scientific term—until Baldwin plants it in his own narrative to explore its applicability in biopolitics. Thus it metaphorically signifies Black populations under political, intellectual, and economic control that exist beyond the ghetto in the strict sense of the term. Baldwin explains the Black middle class as a delusion and points at the difference between wealth and affluence.<sup>64</sup> The ways in which power is exerted, he argues, are evident in policies that shape real lives:

"Wealth is the power to influence or to change the city's zoning laws or the insurance rates or the actuarial tables they apply to Blacks or the textbook industry or the father-to-son labor unions or the composition of the grand juries or the boards of education."<sup>65</sup> Baldwin's fiery argument about the dependence of Black wealth or the Black middle class on racist capitalism is still irrefutable. In his perspective, Black wealth exists as a lever that sustains the technologically advanced Anglo-American capitalism inside and outside the national borders. Based on this order, Baldwin argues, a Black mayor can function only as the "interim caretaker of a valuable chunk of real estate ... attempting to defend and represent a people who do not, for the state, exist."<sup>66</sup> Even the designation of a neighborhood as "Black" evidences the delusion that takes financial wealth to be political power.

Baldwin explains the racialized management of urban space in the US as it produces a captive population:

I had never before realized how simple a matter it is to create a suburb ... In Atlanta, as in other cities, the land on which Blacks had lived was reclaimed, for shopping malls and luxury hotels. In these installations, the grateful poor would—like their ancestors—clean basements, scrub toilet bowls, conquer kitchens, and carry trays. Nor are the Americans at all reluctant to describe this set of affairs as *progress*.<sup>67</sup>

Gentrification creates new spaces where the deeply rooted racial stratifications are reproduced. Subject to the State's urban development policies, the former residents are dispossessed and forced into cheap manual labor, "conquering kitchens," in the very spaces they used to own. By referencing *Lebensraum* and *mare nostrum*, Baldwin demonstrates that the State's development policies always include demographic planning with racist undercurrents.<sup>68</sup> During the 1930s, Germany's plans for an imperialist and nationalist expansion into Eastern Europe, inhabited by Slavs and Jews, to create *Lebensraum*, a "living space," was based on American manifest destiny, and played a role in the brutal extermination of these populations. *Mare nostrum*, the ancient name for the Mediterranean to mean "our sea," was the Roman nautical policy that was taken up during the 1930s by Italy, as a natural inheritor of the Roman Empire. Baldwin's temporal and spatial logic in addressing Atlanta's child murders forges such historical connections to lay bare colonizing processes, whether in East Europe, North or South America, Africa, or the Middle East.

Perusing the spaces of colonial plunder, Baldwin returns to Atlanta and lists the names of the deceased children with the call: "Bring out your dead."<sup>69</sup> The call to bring out your dead is immediately reminiscent of the fourteenth-century custom of collecting dead bodies during the bubonic plague to be buried in mass graves. By evoking this dark chapter in European history, Baldwin weaves the stories of the dispossessed, such as Atlanta's murdered children, wage laborers, and captive populations, together as victims of plague. Plague or disease in this context turns out to be racism in its structural, systemic, linguistic, and psychological manifestations.<sup>70</sup> Bill Schwarz interprets this crisis, or plagued language, in which language betrays human experience, as "semiotic collapse" and "short-circuiting of

thought.<sup>71</sup> Devaluation of Black lives is made possible and legitimized through the only tool of signification: language. In devising a new language, Baldwin takes liberties in narrative. His semiosis evinces a fugitive trajectory of thought, escaping predetermined official narratives with the aim of opening them up to their inner conflicts. In an emotionally complex gesture of witnessing, he calls out, “Bring out your dead.” This time, however, it is not the impersonal call of the collector but the compassionate artist’s recitation, registering the individuality of young persons and remembering those ages, feelings, and terror as his own. In concentric circles, Baldwin makes a foray into his personal past, “with [his] sense that one is always doing one’s first works over.”<sup>72</sup> Inverting the beginnings and endings, he evaluates his lifelong engagement with social issues, and revisits his own childhood in “a dangerously personal way.” He interiorizes time by weaving his childhood fears with the moment of murder—“the terror of being destroyed,” imagining that “that child *was* myself.”<sup>73</sup> In this moment of transgressive identification, which almost leads to a dissolution of the self, the personal history of the witnessing author is riveted onto the collective history. The author must plunge into history to have a grip on reality.

In “doing one’s first works over,” Baldwin adds Wayne Williams “to the list of Atlanta’s slaughtered black children.”<sup>74</sup> Instead of the State-sanctioned narrative of Williams’s guilt, Baldwin offers his own, based on “the evidence of things not seen,” following “what is *not* being said ... *not* being told.” Baldwin borrows the title from the Pauline epigraph: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, / the evidence of things not seen.” One way to interpret this is to read it as a reference to the subtle racism that operates behind the mask of color-blindness, leaving its victims, Atlanta’s murdered children, behind as evidence unseen by the State. Straightforward as it is, this reading limits the reference to the Atlanta child murders, whereas the scope of the text spans diverse spatiotemporalities with a concern for struggling against American definitions. Instead of interrogating the case in and of itself, Baldwin treats it as a symptom of broader issues. Indeed, in the interview with Studs Terkel conducted upon the publication of *Evidence*, Baldwin identifies structures and crimes of racism in the United States to be “a global problem.”<sup>75</sup> Referring to the title, he explains that he means the first part of the epigraph, “faith is the substance of things hoped for,” in an ironical way. He explains that the constructed image of “the Negro” in the Western imagination is “the substance,” whose inferiority was a matter of white supremacist “hope” and “faith,” not of reality. He interprets the following line, “the evidence of things not seen,” to be “[his] absolutely necessary resistance against [that] definition.” He relies on the community’s reflex to resist and refute the terms of that definition—in this context, that definition being the smooth resolution of the murder case with a guilty Wayne Williams. The challenge here, as Baldwin implies, is the community’s colluding with State power. As an artist, his primary tool of resistance against American semiosis is the new language with which to unravel the racist fabric: a condensed spatiotemporality in which, and with which, to shatter the American story of innocence and progress.

*The Evidence of Things Not Seen* sets out to reveal how "American vocabulary" occupies language, racializing concepts such as democracy, equality, rights, power, and crime, and creates complacent myths for itself for the rest of the world to emulate. American semiosis operates in such a way that it deprives the hybrid majority of the world from the real possibilities of these concepts. Just like spatial occupations, thought and language are occupied in this semiosis. However, a break is possible in the writer's workshop, where words and thoughts are freed from the monopoly of official narratives. For the words to circulate in their openness, one needs to see beyond Euro-American cities where democracy seems to be crowned in gold but ironically protected behind concrete walls. Defying parochialism demands a venture beyond the "domestic fictions," as Reid-Pharr puts it, of the American dream, and to dare to drop the tyranny of old terms and frames, to throw "everything ... in question." Painstaking task that it is, Baldwin offers the premise: "I am also stating that our actual and moral alternatives have never been, and are not now, simply at the mercy of the North American inferno."<sup>76</sup> He repeats the same conviction as he ends, "We cannot allow ourselves to be engulfed by the delusion that has brought the Civilization which defines itself as White to such an abject place."<sup>77</sup> Baldwin reminds us that there is a way out of occupied language, mental prisons, and occupied spaces.

Today, the new world order continues to sanctify the freedom of the marketplace and to justify wars with religious undertones, subduing any anti-imperialist and anti-military challenge. On the domestic front, criminalization reproduces abject poverty and ghettoization, and seeks to crush social unrest by police brutality. The Atlanta child murders resonate with the ongoing murders of Black young men and women at the hands of the police. Baldwin has been among the figures to be revived for the clarity of his vision. There is yet more reservoir in Baldwin's writing to be discovered, and challenges to be taken to develop the new language he was experimenting with. Only in terms of a reorganized time and space is it possible to comprehend the mesh of local and global abuses of power that tie the murdered children of Atlanta to, for example, the young African laborers who risk their lives mining, or the child refugees whose lifeless bodies are washed ashore either in the Mediterranean or the Rio Grande.

## Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, "Notes on the House of Bondage" (1980), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 807; "On Language, Race, and the Black Writer" (1979), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon, 2010), pp. 114–17. Baldwin's concern with language, and the ideology that shapes the frame of reference, can be traced as early as *The Fire Next Time*, where he points to the need to change the entire American semiotic structure together with its symbols of power.
- 2 Quincy Troupe, "James Baldwin: 1924–1987: A Tribute—The Last Interview," in Louis H. Pratt and Fred L. Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1989), pp. 285, 291.

- 3 Julius Lester, "James Baldwin: Reflections of a Maverick," in Pratt and Standley (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 231.
- 4 In his eulogy for Baldwin, Amiri Baraka takes issue with the fact that *Evidence* was denied publication in the US, and that Baldwin had to buy its rights to publish it in Europe. Even the book's publication history raises questions about its neglect in the US.
- 5 In addition to occasional missing punctuations, the misspelling of Michael Henry Schwerner (who was among the Freedom Summer volunteers in 1964 working on voter registration and education) as *Schwirner* is especially eye-catching (p. 99). Perhaps not as eye-catching: on the second page, *The Story of Siegfried* is erroneously listed among Baldwin's works, whereas it was written by another James Baldwin (1841–1925), educator, author, and editor. The strange location of the author's dedication to David Baldwin—as "the father and the son"—on the copyright page, which the reader can easily miss, can also be added to the editorial deficiencies.
- 6 James A. Snead, "Baldwin Looks Back," in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Views: James Baldwin* (New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 144.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.
- 8 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Penguin, 1994), p. 361.
- 9 James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York, Viking, 1991), p. 266.
- 10 Douglas Field and Justin A. Joyce, "How Long Blues: An Interview with James Campbell," *James Baldwin Review*, 7 (2021), 179–80.
- 11 Jonathan Eburne, "The Terror of Being Destroyed," *Critical Philosophy of Race*, 3:2 (2015), 263.
- 12 D. Quentin Miller, *A Criminal Power: James Baldwin and the Law* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2012), p. 3.
- 13 Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York, Crown, 2020), p. 198.
- 14 Courtney Thorsson, "'They could be killing kids forever!': The Atlanta Child Murders in African American Literature," *African American Review*, 53:4 (2020), 317.
- 15 Robert Reid-Pharr, "Rendezvous with Life: Reading Early and Late Baldwin," in Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 133.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Ricardo Wilson, "Evidence for Baldwin," *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire*, 11:2/3 (2012), 92.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 19 Christopher Winks, "Into the Heart of Great Wilderness: Understanding Baldwin's Quarrel with *Négritude*," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), 607.
- 20 Begüm Adalet, "Tensions, Terrors, Tenderness: James Baldwin's Politics of Comparison," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 38:3 (2018), 509, 510.
- 21 James Baldwin, "Letters from a Journey" (1963), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 195.
- 22 Kevin Birmingham, "'History's Ass Pocket': The Sources of Baldwinian Diaspora," in Kaplan and Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, p. 149.
- 23 Baldwin, "Letters," pp. 197–8.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Magdalena Zaborowska, *Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 217–18.
- 28 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 401. The phrase "malevolent poverty of spirit" comes from *No Name*. The way I refer to it benefits from Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s intertextual reading of this phrase as Baldwin's ironic allusion to Walt Whitman. For the specific allusion, see Eddie S. Glaude Jr., "The Magician's Serpent: Race and the Tragedy of American Democracy," *James Baldwin Review*, 5 (2019), 18–19.
- 29 Baldwin, *No Name*, p. 463.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 463–4.
- 32 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" (1940), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 392.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Mikko Tuhkanen, "Watching Time: James Baldwin and Malcolm X," *James Baldwin Review*, 2 (2016), 98.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Eric Gary Anderson, "Black Atlanta: An Ecosocial Approach to Narratives of the Atlanta Child Murders," *PMLA*, 122:1 (2007), 196.
- 37 Paul Mokrzycki Renfro, "'The City Too Busy to Care': The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Southern Past, 1979–81," *Southern Cultures*, 21:4 (2015), 48.
- 38 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) (New York, Henry Holt, 1995), pp. 11, 58.
- 39 Terrion L. Williamson, "Why Did They Die? On Combahee and the Serialization of Black Death," *Souls*, 19:3 (2017), 337.
- 40 Joseph Vogel, *James Baldwin and the 1980s: Witnessing the Reagan Era* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2018). Vogel expands his view by comparing the way in which the Atlanta child murders were covered with the way in which the O. J. Simpson case was televised. In the 1990s, he points further, cable TV ratings peaked with the sensational coverage of Rodney King and the Gulf War. Vogel further suggests a continuity of this obsession with televised spectacle, stretching history into the present moment with reference to the recording and publicizing of acts of police brutality on Black bodies through TV, the Internet, and social media.
- 41 Patricia Turner, "The Atlanta Child Murders: A Case Study of Folklore in Black Community," in John Allan Cicala and Stephen Stern (eds.), *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Life* (Logan, Utah State University Press, 1991), pp. 75–86. Turner's case study contrasts what the inflicted community understood to have happened against the official explanation.
- 42 The reopening of the case is being considered. Several documentary series are being produced, all concluding that the Wayne Williams verdict was an easy solution to fend off social unrest.
- 43 For an extensive analysis of the emergence of the first generation of Black officials and how they abandoned anti-capitalist and anti-militarist Black politics of the 1960s, see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2016).
- 44 Anderson, "Black Atlanta," 195.



- 45 For extended discussions on Baldwin's work as it pertains to democracy and political theory, see Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2018); and George Schulman, "Baldwin, Prophecy, and Politics," in Kaplan and Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond*, pp. 106–25.
- 46 Qtd. in Renfro, "The City," 60.
- 47 Baldwin, *Evidence*, p. 2.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 For an account of the evolution of the traditional reference to Israel in African American culture, and the presence of Palestine in 1960s Black liberation discourse, see Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001), pp. 84–124; and Keith P. Feldman, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 59–101. For a specific discussion of Baldwin's politics with regard to Israel, see Timothy Seidel, "'Occupied Territory Is Occupied Territory': James Baldwin, Palestine and the Possibilities of Transnational Solidarity," *Third World Quarterly*, 37:9 (2016), 1644–60; and Nadia Alahmed, "'The Shape of Wrath to Come': James Baldwin's Radicalism and the Evolution of His Thought on Israel," *James Baldwin Review*, 6 (2020), 28–48.
- 59 Baldwin, *Evidence*, p. 29.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 89. For the whole of this condensed spatiotemporality sequence, see pp. 89–94.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 65 *Ibid.*
- 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 38–9.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 68 *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 93.
- 69 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.
- 70 Plague also resonates with the AIDS epidemic, especially at a time when lives were punctuated by frequent news of hospitalizations and deaths of loved ones. Vogel analyzes how it was for Baldwin, noting his reluctance to be affiliated with gay communities or to openly address AIDS. Reading through this silence especially in the unpublished 1980s play, "The Welcome Table," Vogel discovers that real-life references to AIDS lurk beneath Baldwin's frequent references to life's fragility and evanescence, and emotional intimacy that was at risk.
- 71 Bill Schwarz, "After Decolonization, After Civil Rights: Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin," *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), 57.
- 72 Baldwin, *Evidence*, p. 123.

- 73 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.  
 74 *Ibid.*, p. 125.  
 75 Studs Terkel, "James Baldwin Discusses his Book 'The Evidence of Things Not Seen,'" The WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive, November 22, 1985, <https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/james-baldwin-discusses-his-book-evidence-things-not-seen> (accessed April 25 2021).  
 76 Baldwin, *Evidence*, p. 48.  
 77 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

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- . *No Name in the Street* (1972), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), pp. 349–475.
- . "On Language, Race, and the Black Writer" (1979), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon, 2010), pp. 114–17.
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