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ESSAY

On the Fugitive Radicalism of *Jimmy's Blues*

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Abstract

Like much of his prose and nonfiction, Baldwin's poetry follows his actual and figurative movement between Europe and America against the backdrop of his homeland's constant refusal to work through its racist, imperialist, and heterosexist legacies. The 2014 reissue of his two poetry collections, *Jimmy's Blues* (1983) and *Gypsy* (1989), as *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems* urges us to revisit Baldwin's poetry as an expression of his ideas and sentiments through a different lens: that of a blues poetics. In Baldwin's poetry, the blues provide an aesthetic and epistemic framework for his expression of a radical internationalist politics of liberation.

Keywords: fugitivity, radicalism, blues, cosmopolitanism, internationalism, poetry, *Jimmy's Blues*

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When Malcolm X reportedly dubbed James Baldwin "the poet of the revolution," little did he know that he was identifying what would long remain some of the most understudied aspects of Baldwin's legacy: his political radicalism and his poetry.[1] While the former has received renewed attention in recent years, with Bill V. Mullen's 2019 critical biography *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* offering perhaps the most comprehensive study of the author's engagement with radical politics, Baldwin's poetic oeuvre remains underexplored by scholars and little known to a general readership. To date, only a handful of literary critics have taken an in-depth look at his poetry.[2] Recent monographs on his life and work, too, have largely glossed over this aspect of Baldwin's writing.[3] However, Ed Pavlić's assertion that, in the 1970s, Baldwin's prose became more poetic in that it "intended to figure and signify" rather than to "articulate" his politics and ideas invites a critical engagement with his poetry.[4] The 2014 reissue of his only two published collections of poems, *Jimmy's Blues* (1983) and *Gypsy* (1989), as *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems* urges us to revisit Baldwin's experimentation with poetry as a mode of writing through many of the ideas and sentiments he had expressed elsewhere, but through a different lens: that of a blues poetics. In Baldwin's poetry, the blues provide an aesthetic and epistemic framework for his expression of a radical internationalist politics of liberation.

Turning our critical attention to Baldwin's poems can help us develop a fuller picture of his legacy, contributing to the recent turn in Baldwin scholarship that reexamines his later, less celebrated work as well as his engagement with radical politics. Although Baldwin wrote poetry throughout his life, and would, as Pavlić reminds us, sometimes refer to himself as "a kind of poet," he did not release a book of poetry until 1983.[5] Showcasing poems written over the span of at least a decade and a half (with the earliest of the dated poems written in 1970, and the latest in 1986), *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems* offers an as yet underexplored insight into Baldwin's ever-shifting political and aesthetic alignments in his later years. Baldwin's transnationalism— which, to Douglas Field, fuses a "celebration of cosmopolitan exile" with his increasingly sharp attunement to "the internationalism of the black experience"—manifests clearly in his poetry, as does his "embrace of global anti-imperialist politics … and engagement with anti-colonial, subaltern, anti-racist struggles" that is the focus of Mullen's study.[6] In his poems, cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and other forms of actual and figurative mobility become carriers of radical politics with the help of the blues as an essentially fugitive aesthetic and epistemology. Baldwin's sense of being "born [Black] in a white country" that has "evolved no terms for [his] existence" as an "unspeakable" condition anticipates Fred Moten's understanding of fugitivity as an uncertain state between enslavement and freedom that shapes modern Black social, intellectual, and creative life.[7] But Baldwin's exile also means a certain liberation from the confines of Western ways of knowing, thinking, and being and, instead, a freedom to engage in what Moten dubs the "radically imaginative sociopoetic work of refusal."[8] The blues, as will be explained below, offer a culturally Black aesthetic and epistemic framework for Baldwin's radical refusal to accept the political and moral status quo of 1970s and 1980s America.

This article reads Baldwin's poems through the prism of the blues as a mode of cultural expression and culturally specific Black American epistemology, but it also puts the poetry into conversation with Baldwin's nonfiction writing to illustrate the continuity of politically radical thought in his body of work. The first publication of his poems in 1983 reads, in a way, as a response to the call he had made three years earlier in "Notes on the House of Bondage." There, Baldwin continues his longstanding prophecy of an impending Fanonian revolution in which the "black citizen[s] (!) of what is left of Harlem" will join the ranks of the Global South to bring about the fall of "the very last white country the world will ever see," insisting that such a radical restructuring of the world would also mean "the end of a language" and, consequently, the need "of forging a new one." [9] It was perhaps in hope of the political and spiritual efficacy of such "new," poetic language—one whose potential he had not yet tapped into, at least not in print—that Baldwin shared his poetry with the world. As David Leeming recalls, Baldwin in the early 1980s was "turning more and more frequently to the composition of poems," and thought of poetry as a "'way of experimenting' with language, with 'black English' as a vehicle for seeing as well as for saying."[10] However, while his use of repetition, worried lines, syncopation, and call-and-response patterns in some of the lyrics certainly makes them sound like the blues, it is the blues' cultural, political, and ethical rootedness in Black traditions, Black ways of knowing, and Black perspectives that seems to be of overarching importance to Baldwin.

In his choice of the blues as the guiding framework for his poetry, Baldwin situates it firmly in the context of African American culture as well as knowledge, anticipating later critical approaches to the blues as a uniquely Black epistemology. Baldwin's poetics evokes the blues as he understands them some two decades earlier in "The Uses of the Blues": referring "not to music" but "to the experience of life, or the state of being, out of which the blues come."[11] The blues, to him, are an epistemic framework for understanding the full range of African American life and all its contradictions, a philosophical proposition that "there's always something a little funny in all our disasters, if one can face the disaster."[12] True comprehension and genuine artistic expression of these paradoxical conditions of Black life require that it is lived rather than observed. One cannot, in Baldwin's view, "know what the river is like or what the ocean is like by standing on the shore," and the blues are a way of formulating and expressing this knowledge from such culturally specific states of immersion.[13] Importantly, such epistemic framing of the blues as a distinctly Black way of knowing is not unique to Baldwin but lies at the heart of blues theory and criticism that emerged in the 1980s. For example, Amiri Baraka defines the blues as "first a feeling, a sense—knowledge," and Clyde Woods proposes that the blues have historically functioned as both an "aesthetic tradition" and a theoretical framework for Black "critique of plantation social relations and their extensions" after the Civil War.[14] Houston A. Baker Jr.

identifies what he dubs “the blues matrix” as a network of cultural codes and experiential, vernacular ways of knowing unique to Black Americans, in which African American expressive traditions are “always already” embedded.[15] Anticipating these scholarly approaches, Baldwin’s blues, too, have their “use” as expressions of culturally grounded affect, experiential knowledge, radical social critique, and Black aesthetics.

This radical potential of the blues also lies in their fugitivity, or their elusion of epistemic or aesthetic capture by those who, in Baldwin’s aquatic metaphor, decide to safely remain on the shore. The blues have always been a mode of communication from the lower frequencies, to paraphrase Ralph Ellison, with doublespeak and signification enacted as strategies to convey meanings that escape definition and appropriation by mainstream white audiences. Theorists such as Stephen E. Henderson and Amiri Baraka have underscored this essentially fugitive quality of the blues. To Henderson, the “blues spirit” of Black American poetry comes from “the contradiction of being an alien in one’s native land.”[16] For Baraka, the blues are a quintessential modality of African American expression in that they allow the Black artist to render “his version of America—from that no-man’s land outside the mainstream” society that is also a position of “an invisible strength within it.”[17] Resonating deeply with Baldwin’s self-proclaimed status as “a bastard of the West,” this fugitive quality of the blues allows him to explore the powerful improvisatory creativity unconstrained by Euro-American ways of thinking and seeing the world.[18] Being *from* but not quite *of* America, writing mostly—with the exception of his Turkish years—from the global West, Baldwin is not only a “transatlantic commuter” but also a transatlantic fugitive from an “occupied territory,” living and speaking from remote nooks of the Western plantation.[19] In *Jimmy’s Blues and Other Poems*, this potential of fugitivity for delivering radical political critique is explored through a combination of cosmopolitan and internationalist sensibilities.

In some of his poems, Baldwin’s fugitivity takes on the form of cosmopolitan nomadism, a stance through which he finds personal liberation from the bondage of the American nation-state’s stifling, hegemonic policing of his race and sexuality. Situating the blues in the context of newly acquired geographical mobility and ownership of one’s body as key changes for African Americans after the Civil War, Angela Y. Davis writes that the “new blues consciousness was shaped by and gave expression to at least two … transformations: travel and sexuality.”[20] Read through this lens, “Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y.S.)” becomes an expression of Baldwin’s own transnational “Great Migration” as a vehicle for sexual liberation. Signifying on the historical trajectory of Black music’s shift away from the realm of the sacred and into that of the secular, the poem plays with what Davis describes as “provocative and pervasive sexual—including homosexual—imagery” of the blues to mark the largely autobiographical speaker’s emancipation from familial, religious, and political constraints and taboos.[21] Contrasted with the puritan United States, a liberal western European metropolis such as Munich offers a vantage point from which Baldwin can explore the universally human themes of longing, desire, and love beyond a racialized context, while retaining a cultural understanding of them as essentially "blueslike subjects and situations."[22] The speaker in Baldwin's love lyric anxiously awaits the arrival of his lover:

> In a strange house,
> a strange bed
> in a strange town,
> a very strange me
> is waiting for you.[23]

The "strangeness" of both the setting and the speaker, amplified and brought to the forefront of the reader's attention through repetition, testifies to Baldwin's self-ascribed status as a perennial "stranger" from the American nation-state and its heteropatriarchal matrix. Seemingly a reverse to the quintessentially cosmopolitan feeling of being a "citizen of the world," this condition of strangeness is not necessarily one of estrangement; rather, it evokes Baldwin's reconciliation to being a "transatlantic commuter" who decides to embrace, and "turn to [his] advantage," his status of being "a stranger everywhere."[24] In fact, even amid the perceived "strangeness" of the setting, the speaker does not feel unwelcome or alienated: a toddler with whom he shares his temporary living space is "making strange sounds" but also "deciding, after all / to be [his] friend," and the weather "feels like snow."[25] This familiarity with both local weather patterns and his hosts—presumably friends close enough to leave their baby with him—suggests a level of comfort and intimacy with his environs. Uncannily, strangeness in the poem is a somewhat homely condition that the nomadic speaker has managed to "turn to [his] advantage" in an act of cosmopolitan fugitivity.

If there is a sense of estrangement in this poem, it emerges in a biographical reading that identifies the speaker with Baldwin and thus unearths the implied contrast between his life as a cosmopolitan traveler, friend, and lover in the eponymous Munich and his early life as a queer Black man and a preacher's son in Harlem. As the speaker fantasizes about reuniting with his lover, he recalls a raunchy joke made by a mutual friend who commented "that I saw your hair red / because I was not thinking / of the hair on your head."[26] This recollection is immediately followed by another one, this time of the speaker's father telling him: "*It is a terrible thing, / son, / to fall into the hands of the living God*."[27] The contrast between the two encounters is as clear as the connection between them: what links a friend's lighthearted, if racy, commentary on the speaker's interracial and queer relationship and the father's admonition about the possibility of divine wrath is the awareness that the religion he grew up with would surely condemn him for his sexual preferences and practices. From a distance both temporal and spatial, the speaker now claims to "know what [his father] was saying" and states that he "could not have seen red / before finding myself / in this strange, this waiting bed."[28] The double entendre of "seeing red" connotes the rage of his father and "his" God and the offending cause of this indignation that is the speaker's homosexuality, and marks the speaker's process of "expatriating" himself from his father('s)land as a blues-like movement from the realm of the sacred to that of the secular. Until he "found himself"—referring at once to the actual physical location and an act of self-discovery—in the strange, or "queer," land away from both his father and America, the speaker could neither see—nor be seen with—his "red" lover openly, nor allow himself to fully express his anger at and resentment of prohibitive, heteropatriarchal American morality.

Later in the poem, the speaker looks out to the streets, the weather, and the animal life around him to further associate Munich—or, more accurately, the cosmopolitan possibility of being anywhere away from the "intolerable, and more than that, personally menacing" life in America—with freedom of self-creation and self-expression.[29] In the poem's final stanza, he draws on his earlier observation of "[s]tarlings circl[ing] in the sky" to liken himself and his lover to the birds who, like them, have "wings and voices / are making choices / are using what they have."[30] From folk tales and spirituals through the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Maya Angelou, birds and flight are what Henderson terms a *saturated* image, or *mascon*, in African American musical and literary traditions, connoting Black desire for freedom. Unlike Dunbar's and Angelou's American "caged birds," Baldwin's European starlings are "whirring" and "stirring," preparing for an "unknown passage" through "the terrifying air" but, crucially, free and in motion, like an archetypal blues traveler.[31] The birds, who "must get the journey done" and lovingly support one another "on long journeys," stand in for the speaker who sees his migration overseas as a life-saving necessity—a flight away from the sexual repressions and racial oppressions of America—and a liberating possibility of forging new, supportive and nourishing relationships on his own terms.[32] This state of fugitivity may be fraught with uncertainty but also rich in the prospects of self-creation as a cosmopolitan subject, no longer governable by the heteropatriarchal structures of his birthplace.

Another poem in *Jimmy's Blues* whose very title announces the cosmopolitan orientation of the speaker is "Le sporting-club de Monte Carlo (for Lena Horne)." Its French-language title, together with the elegant location of Monte Carlo and the celebrity connection it evokes, seem to promise a somewhat elitist version of the cosmopolitan experience, reserved for the worldly, highly cultured, and at least relatively wealthy travelers and visitors to the French Riviera. However, this presumed disconnect from the plight and experience of an average "black citizen (!) of what is left of Harlem" disappears as the poem progresses to signify on its high-class setting by subversively appropriating it as a conduit for a revolutionary, liberatory Black consciousness "from below" as channeled through Black music. The poem opens with a playful variation on "The Lady is a Tramp," performed by Horne in the 1948 film *Words and Music*, riffing off the song's lyrics to assert that "the lady is a tramp / a camp / a lamp" as well as "a sight / a might / a light."[33] This "campy" repetition of single-syllable rhymes hints at a vision of Horne as a powerful luminary, both "a might" and "a light" to her listeners, pointing to Baldwin's understanding of popular culture's dual potential to both disseminate and resist white America's dominant systems of value, power, and oppression. Switching tone from its playful opening, the poem's last stanza presents Horne as an inspiring presence whose artistic output stimulates revolutionary action:

> the lady is a wonder
> daughter of the thunder
> smashing cages
> legislating rages
> with the voice of ages
> singing us through.[34]

Just as Horne's properly "ladylike," smiling, Hollywood-friendly image in productions such as *Words and Music* was accompanied by her often radical civil rights activism, the poem's posh cosmopolitan setting announced in its title becomes a site of activist Black art and consciousness. Both Horne's persona and the speaker's reflection on her performance are tricksterish in their reappropriation of capitalist, white-centered sites of entertainment—from Hollywood to Monte Carlo—as channels for the radical messaging of Black liberation. Although they are removed from "what is left of Harlem" in geography as well as in class status, both Horne the poetic subject and Baldwin the poet embrace the Black aesthetic as politics; and they achieve this by using their celebrity and privilege as vehicles for producing fugitive art that is, like the blues, "singing [Black people] through" their struggles in America and beyond.

It is worth underscoring that the "us," or "we," in Baldwin's poetry—as exemplified by the closing line of "Le sporting-club"—is, unlike in his early essays, generally exclusive of white America. Much has been written about Baldwin's careful, deliberate use of pronouns throughout his writing, with the general critical consensus being that, particularly in "his first three volumes of essays Baldwin had famously used [the first-person plural] pronoun to claim his citizenship in the U.S. nation."[35] As Cheryl A. Wall explains, this "usage had played a critical role in Baldwin's strategic American exceptionalism" as it "enabled him to claim a citizenship that had not been fully granted" and, consequently, to criticize the United States "out of love and a sense of belonging."[36] Few instances of such use of the collective "we" referring to both Black and white Americans can be found in *Jimmy's Blues*. For the most part, first-person plural pronouns in Baldwin's poems refer either to a couple of lovers or, in their more explicitly political use, to a collective Black speaker. Following a shift in Baldwin's writing about individual and collective identity, the "we" standing "on the auction-block / of Manifest Destiny" in "Song (for Skip)" is a radical departure from his earlier statements in "Stranger in the Village" that repeatedly grammatically separated the "I" of the author from the "him" of "the American Negro."[37] Taking place not only in the poems' grammar but also in their content, this transition from alienation and American exceptionalism to solidarity and Black internationalism inscribes Baldwin's poetry into what Mullen describes as a "capacious, revolutionary theory and practice of lived resistance to capitalism, imperialism, and oppression" that can be traced throughout the body of his work but becomes particularly pronounced in his writings from the 1970s and 1980s.[38]

Making explicit the usually subtle political undertones of heartbreak and break-up blues, "A Lover's Question" is a poem that repeats Baldwin's oft-stated metaphorical, ideological, and epistemic break with the nation whose soul he once tried to save, enacting his concept of the artist as engaged in "a lover's war" with his society in lyrical form.[39] Having once declared that he "love[s] America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, [he] insist[s] on the right to criticize her perpetually," he here offers a postscript of realization that whatever is left of this love is not worth the continuation of this toxic relationship: "No man can have a harlot / for a lover / nor stay in bed forever / with a lie."[40] Although the poem's extended, blues-like metaphor of the relationship between himself and America as one between two lovers inspires the use of singular first- and second-person pronouns, the "I" in the lyric is fugitive, never quite stable in its meaning and constantly shifting its referents from a speaker who might be identified with Baldwin the individual to one that embodies a collective African American consciousness. As the latter, the speaker recalls various forms of anti-Black violence committed throughout American history, identifying himself as "a street nigger" who has "endured your fire / and your whip, / your rope, / and the panic from your hip."[41] Tellingly, the speaker's history does not begin in America but dates back to his African origins:

> I am your black cat.
>
> *You forget*
> *that I remember an Egypt*
> *where I was worshipped*
> *where I was loved.*[42]

Even though the speaker continues to identify as one who, at least in a certain way, belongs to America—being, after all, *her* "nigger" and *her* "black cat"—he metonymically underscores the role of memory of his collective African roots in the process of self-creation and assertion of his identity, and points to the role of historical and cultural erasure—America's "forgetting"—in the process of reducing him to "something beneath you."[43] Saturated with cross-cultural meanings, the figure of a "black cat" connects the jazz-era African American vernacular English and its use of "cat" to refer to a hip person, the spiritually charged idea of cat veneration in ancient Egypt, and the superstition of the black cat as an omen of bad luck rooted in doctrines of early Christianity. This multilayered signification enacts a "historically traceable *Cosmopolitanism* of the African people" that, according to Baraka, makes belonging to a nation-state antithetical to Africana politics.[44] It also lends support to Field's argument that "by his death in 1987 there was a notable if not fully articulated change in [Baldwin's] views" on the entanglements between African and African American culture and consciousness, as evidenced in Baldwin's increased recognition of spiritual and aesthetic Blackness as a transatlantic continuum.[45]

The poem's eponymous question—"Why / have you allowed yourself / to become so *grinly* wicked?"—encapsulates the range of conflicting emotions of love, hate, heartbreak, anger, resentment, and disappointment that characterize the speaker's troubled process of emancipation from his oppressive relationship with America.[46] Evoking at once the grimness of the wicked empire and the smugness with which it has been committing its crimes, the neologism "grinly" contributes to Baldwin's aforementioned project of forging a new language to describe a "post-white" reality. Yet his vision for the future of the American nation-state is, typically for Baldwin, ambivalent. On the one hand, the speaker "sings" America as *his* "country," *his* "dear" and "darling," claiming, still in the present tense, that his love for it "has been as constant / as the rays / coming from the earth." On the other, he renounces it as a suicidal "false lover" and genocidal "enemy of all tribes," and states that he "desperately … hoped" for it to "grow" and realize "that what you do to me / you do to you"—the past tense of this declaration implying that he has since given up hope for America's moral self-reckoning.[47] Ultimately, the poem's ending only faintly echoes the duality of the famous closing paragraphs of *The Fire Next Time* that at once prophesied "cosmic vengeance" upon America and called for a joint effort by "the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks" who, "like lovers," must do "all in [their] power to change that fate."[48] Here, too, the speaker announces that there is "hope / beyond the rope" that America has fashioned for herself on her "hanging tree"; however, this hope no longer lies in any lover-like partnership of a united Black and white "we."[49] Rather, having turned out to be a "false lover," the implicitly white America is now on her own and can no longer count on Black people's continued labor, including the emotional kind, to help amend her fundamental errors. She is welcome to learn from her "black dancer" who "holds the answer" but only as an observer, not a partner; and while she may eventually "know / what love has managed / here below"—in the underground, fugitive space of Black community-building—this love no longer extends to her.[50] Published over two decades after *The Fire Next Time*, the poem seems to suggest that, in Reagan's America, Black people have "no more water" to spare to quench the fire, nor are they any longer interested in being "integrated into a burning house."[51]

The radicalism of Baldwin's blues poetics resounds particularly loudly when his poems take a look at America not necessarily from away but from below, as signaled in the closing line of "A Lover's Question." The poems discussed so far propose a cosmopolitan fugitivity as a mode of transcending the apparent impossibility of Black and/or queer (self-)liberation within the geopolitical and ideological borders of the United States, be it the heteropatriarchal repression of one's sexual identity and cross-racial desire in "Munich," the subterranean revolutionary call of Lena Horne heard from across the Atlantic in "Le sporting-club," or the psychologically exhausting love–hate relationship with one's violent, foundationally anti-Black birthplace in “A Lover’s Question.” Whether explicitly (in “Munich” and “Le sporting-club”) or implicitly (in “Question”), Baldwin’s cosmopolitan setting allows him a perspective of distanced estrangement that defamiliarizes and denaturalizes America, also present in much of his essay writing. Yet, as an “alien in one’s native land,” the speaker in his poems does not necessarily need to physically travel abroad to find this vantage point, as the impossible condition of being a “black citizen (!)” in America is always already a look from a “here below.”

Several poems in *Jimmy’s Blues* look toward or speak from the margins of American society. The blues, as William Barlow reminds us, are “a collective expression of the ideology and character of Black people situated at the bottom of the social order in America.”[52] Looking for the liberatory possibilities that such situatedness might carry, Moten considers the possibility of a Black *subcosmopolitanism* that, rather than requiring an affiliation with the nation-state as a precondition for becoming a citizen of the world, adopts a fugitive “improvisational mechanics” of statelessness “from below.”[53] Such is the perspective in “Song (for Skip),” whose speaker echoes W. E. B. Du Bois in his assertion of a second sight, or heightened perceptiveness, shared by African Americans whose experience of non-belonging and alienation necessitates an in-depth critical understanding of America:

> Who says better? Who knows more
> than those who enter at that door
> called back
> for Black[54]

Even more pronounced is the underground statelessness as explored in “Confession,” where the speaker claims intimate knowledge of the Black American underclass—a nation within a nation—through snapshots of the lives of the casualties of the American Dream: the alcoholic “Wanda, the wan,” incarcerated “Ziggy, the Zap,” and conflicted homosexual “Terry, the torn.”[55] Like the “submerged” communities Baldwin describes in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), they represent a people whom the “great, vast, shining Republic knows nothing about … and cares nothing about.”[56] But it is in “Staggerlee wonders,” the long opening poem from *Jimmy’s Blues*, that Baldwin’s subterranean critique of the delusional and violent ideologies of this “shining Republic” is at its sharpest, and his radical, fugitive, and Black internationalist orientation more clearly pronounced than anywhere else in the volume.

“Staggerlee wonders” offers a scathing critique of 1980s America as a crumbling empire—morally bankrupt, irredeemably racist, and positively poisonous to the rest of the world. Written in the aftermath of the 1980 presidential election, the poem continues the tradition of the blues as aesthetic response to the sociopolitical urgencies of Black America. The blues, as Woods proposes, emerged out of a collective need to find a “material basis for an ethic of survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation” for African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South—a historical moment later paralleled by their resurgence in the 1980s in response to the "reversal of progress, the collapse of the Second Reconstruction" that took place under the Reagan administration.[57] Indeed, it might have been the presidency of Reagan—whom Baldwin called out as a "third-rate, failed, ex-Warner Brothers contract player" and America's "justification of *Birth of a Nation*"—that, together with encouragement from his brother David, pushed Baldwin to finally publish his poetry.[58] In Robin D. G. Kelley's apt summary, the early 1980s were "a new age of revolution," a time when "the Reagan and Thatcher years ushered in a new era of corporate wealth and callous disregard for the poor and people of color," but when, simultaneously, "Afrocentrism and cultural nationalism captured the imagination of various segments of the Black community across class lines."[59] Alongside poems such as "Song (for Skip)" or "Confession," "Staggerlee wonders" testifies to Baldwin's affinity with this wave of the Black radical tradition and its critique of Reagan's resurgent plantation.

A persona poem, "Staggerlee" is written in the voice of its eponymous "badman" antihero, an archetypical blues figure mythologized in African American work songs, toasts, and blues recorded by artists such as Mississippi John Hurt, Ma Rainey, and Duke Ellington, among others. The character of Staggerlee traditionally connotes an irreverent, outlandish, and outlawed Black masculinity, and narratives about him follow his exploits as a gambler, killer, and, finally, the ruler of hell. Baldwin's choice of Staggerlee as the opening voice for his collection firmly situates it not only in African American vernacular cultures but also in the cultural nationalist imagery of the 1960s. Within Baldwin's own body of work, Staggerlee previously appeared in his preface to *A Lonely Rage*, the 1978 memoir by the Black Panther Party's Bobby Seale. There, Baldwin emphasizes Seale's identification with "Stagolee" on his journey into manhood and political activism.[60] Although the poem's Staggerlee certainly adopts a radically anti-American, internationalist perspective and raw, uncompromising rhetoric associated with Black nationalist leaders such as Seale, he is far from proposing militant masculinity as the path to liberation. Rather, he exposes the twisted entanglements of masculinity and nationalism in the dominant American mythology. In the first of the poem's four sections, Staggerlee sarcastically addresses John Wayne and Ronald Reagan as embodiments of America's nationalist fantasies, at once violently masculine and hopelessly immature:

> Oh, noble Duke Wayne,
> be careful in them happy hunting grounds […]
> Oh, towering Ronnie Reagan,
> wise and resigned lover of redwoods, […]
> be thou our grinning, gently phallic, Big Boy of all the ages![61]

Here, Wayne and Reagan become "gently phallic"—both obsessed with and insecure about their manhood—archetypes of a white American masculinity that is constructed through racist violence and aggressive individualism, corroborated by the ideological mechanisms of mass media entertainment, federal politics, and militarism. The all-American violence they represent is also all-permeating, present even in the physical landscapes of North America: after all, the mention of Reagan's affinity for redwoods structurally corresponds to what the poem presents as Wayne's view of American land as his "hunting ground" for Native Americans, reminding the reader of the genocidal origins of such seemingly innocuous symbols as the national parks. Nothing in the country, Staggerlee suggests, remains untainted by its violent foundational project. At the same time, this "ideal" American masculinity is that of a "man-child," one who refuses to accept responsibility for the atrocities committed in his name, or even to comprehend them as such: "Then, perhaps they imagine / that their crimes are not crimes? // Perhaps. / Perhaps that is why they cannot repent," Staggerlee muses elsewhere in the poem.[62] As Baldwin elaborates in his 1985 essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," it is "an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden—as an unpatriotic act—that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood."[63] Embracing complexity would require coming to terms with one's history and this, in turn, would shatter the myth of American innocence.

The poem's Staggerlee, at once witness to American history and a prophet of its future, syncretizes Baldwin's characteristic rhetoric of the Black church with that of Black nationalism to dispel any lingering illusions about the nation's innocence. At first, he attempts to penetrate the psyche of the white male American ruling class—"the pink and alabaster pragmatists" who are "nostalgic for noble causes, / aching, nobly, to wade through the blood of savages"—by stripping all euphemisms they may be hiding behind and wondering, in plainly racist language, "what they think the niggers are doing" and "how they think / the niggers made, make it, / how come the niggers are still here."[64] However, he soon becomes "fairly certain they don't think of that at all" and that their "blindness" to both the crimes they have committed and their consequences is a matter of a conscious avoidance of responsibility rather than simple naivety.[65] Coming to see that mutual understanding and reconciliation are impossible in the face of constant white refusal of any and all accountability, Staggerlee—not unlike the weary speaker in "A Lover's Question"—eventually performatively "breaks up" with America, pursuing separatism as self-preservation:

> your innocence costs too much
> and we can't carry you on our books
> or our backs, any longer: baby,
> find another Eden[66]

Tearing down the protective walls of this illusionary "Eden" of white American innocence, he considers the long history of the nation's racist, economic, political, military, ideological, psychological, and even environmental crimes. He exposes "American boys" as "sons of greed, the heirs of plunder," responsible for "the stricken buffalo, the slaughtered tribes," "the endless, virgin, bloodsoaked plain," "murder masquerading as salvation, seducing / every democratic eye," "the mouths of truth and anguish choked with cotton," and "rape delirious with the fragrance of magnolia."[67] From settler colonial genocide through chattel slavery, lynching, sexual violence, ecocide, war, and the weaponization of religion and democratic ideals, this catalog of atrocities and immoralities exposes the American nation-state for its sins and foretells imminent divine revenge: "they know / that their empire is falling, is doomed, / nothing can hold it up, nothing."[68] In an increasingly prophetic tone, Staggerlee asserts that this Armageddon has been inscribed in the self-destructive foundational American project from its very beginning: "Manifest Destiny is a hymn to madness, / feeding on itself, ending / (when it ends) in madness."[69] The downfall of the empire is an inevitable act of not only historical but also moral justice, a divine punishment for willed ignorance; it is the fire *this* time that, now, "is not quenched, / nor can be: the oil feeding the flames / being the unadmitted terror of the wrath of God."[70]

Rooted in the discourses of liberation theology and Black militancy alike, Staggerlee's emancipation from the American nation-state is, significantly, internationalist at its core. In his reading of *No Name in the Street*, Bill Lyne observes how Baldwin's "move away from American exceptionalism and toward an internationalist perspective" in that text results in "descriptions of a civilization without honor and the end of the white Western party" that are "almost direct echoes of Aimé Césaire's 1955 *Discourse on Colonialism*."[71] In turn, Staggerlee's monologue echoes *No Name*'s conclusion that "to be Afro-American" is to share the fate "of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend," yet still hoped "to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life."[72] Staggerlee does, indeed, attempt to redeem the kingdom by repeatedly calling upon his white American "kinsmen" to mend their ignorant and ignoble ways. Echoing Baldwin's oft-repeated insistence on the damaging effects of racism on the white American psyche, he mourns his failed attempts to appeal to their morality: "Ah! Kinsmen, if I could make you see / the crime is not what you have done to me! / It is you who are blind, / you, bowed down with chains."[73] At this stage of "the American crisis, which is part of a global, historical crisis," Staggerlee seems to know that his is a lone voice in the wilderness.[74] Mirroring Baldwin's assertion in *No Name* that "the Western party is over," Staggerlee admits that, for his "stricken kinsmen, / the party is over."[75] His denunciation of America is dictated as much by its domestic as by its international acts of violence, as the "alabaster pragmatists" are pronounced guilty not only of the aforementioned litany of atrocities and filling the nation's prisons "Up to our ass in niggers / on Death Row," but also of

> entering onto the quicksand of
> China
> and patronizing
> Africa,
> and calculating
> the Caribbean plunder, and
> the South China Sea booty[76]

Considering the global dimension of its sins, the reckoning, too, will come both from within and beyond the empire's national borders. As Staggerlee imagines—with a prophecy that, in a post-9/11 world, comes across as hauntingly hyperreal—"the despair of Fifth Avenue" right before "the sky / and the towers come tumbling down, / before the earth opens, as it does in *Superman*," he also warns his doomed "kinsmen" that, in Africa,

> a new generation is about to rise,
> and will not need your bribes,
> or your persuasions, any more:
> not your morality. […][77]

Both in his catalogs of the American empire's past and ongoing atrocities and in his prophetic visions for its downfall, Staggerlee adopts a Black internationalist perspective, which, as Darryl C. Thomas explains, connects "the African American struggle for liberation with Third World struggles against colonialism, white supremacy at home and abroad, and racial capitalism," and asserts that all "victims of racial capitalism and imperialism" share "a common interest in overthrowing white supremacy and creating a new world order based on social justice and racial equality."[78] In this liberatory spirit of the Black radical tradition, Staggerlee's indictment of American imperialism suggests a cross-racial, transnational solidarity "from below."

While Baldwin's internationalist vision certainly draws from the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist sentiments voiced by leaders of Black freedom movements of his recent past—most prominently those of the later, vocally anti-capitalist Martin Luther King Jr., the post-Bandung Conference Malcolm X, and the intercommunalist Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party—his stance throughout the poem remains fugitive in its avoidance of all dogma, impossible to identify with any particular ideology within the Black radical tradition. To the contrary, the cynical, maverick persona of Staggerlee becomes a mouthpiece for his criticism of the limitations of the civil rights movement's programmatic nonviolence as well as of Malcolm X's early Black nationalist rejection of his "slave name." In reference to the former, he speculates that, perhaps, "what the niggers / is supposed to be doing / is putting themselves in the path / of that old sweet chariot / and have it swing down and carry us home."[79] The sarcastic citation from the spiritual that had been sung by the enslaved hoping to find their way to freedom as well as by participants in civil rights marches and sit-downs may be interpreted as scolding the latter for their passive, "enslaved" mentality; on the other hand, these lines may also be read as an insight into the mind of Staggerlee's implied white liberal interlocutor, whose proclaimed support for nonviolence is, here, revealed as *de facto* support for inaction and preservation of the status quo. As for his criticism of Malcolm X and Black Muslims, Staggerlee expresses his suspicion of performatively Black nationalist gestures such as changing one's name, arguing instead for a more profound, structural change on a socioeconomic level:

> […] Niggers don't own nothing,
> got no flag, even our names
> are hand-me-downs
> and you don't change that
> by calling yourself X:
> sometimes that just makes it worse […][80]

The exclusion of Black Americans from the capitalist property economy (they own "nothing") and citizenship ("no flag"), as well as the erasure of their transatlantic African lineage through the forced assignment of English first names and the enslavers' last names to the enslaved, are material issues that cannot be solved by performative individual action. Such action, in fact, can be detrimental in its unintentional complicity with the cultural and historical erasure of Black American heritage, obliterating "the path that leads back / to whence you came, and / to where you can begin."[81] This heritage, for better or worse, is both African and American, a "unique creation" with "no counterpart anywhere, and no predecessors," as Baldwin explained back in *The Fire Next Time*.[82] Knowledge and awareness of history, however violent and painful, are necessary for change, for "nothing can be changed until it is faced."[83]

While he avoids wholesale affiliation with any particular political doctrine, Baldwin's Staggerlee—in particular whenever he switches from the singular, wondering, and contemplative "I" to the plural "we"—certainly identifies with Black cultural, spiritual, and political traditions and communities in general. Toward the end of the poem, the now plural, community-identified speaker clearly inscribes his message into the tradition of orally transmitted ancestral wisdom: "During this long travail / our ancestors spoke to us, and we listened, / and we tried to make you hear life in our song."[84] From the spirituals and the blues all the way to rap, Black music has been the vehicle for telling the truth about the Black experience in America. However, more often than not, this truth has been distorted, commodified, misunderstood, or simply unheard by the white audience—not only blind, as Staggerlee repeats throughout the poem, but also deaf. Tired of their refusal to hear "life in our song" and, thus, acknowledge Black humanity, Staggerlee restates his separatist stance, announcing that "now it matters not at all to me / whether you know what I am talking about—or not."[85] At once engaging in the signifying tradition of doublespeak and announcing its exhaustion, the speaker turns away from his white audience. As Cecil Brown observes, Baldwin, by the time of writing the poem, "felt that black men in America" had to "seek and find in their own tradition the human qualities that white men, through their unrelenting brutality, had lost."[86] In "Staggerlee," this tradition is that of the blues, Black English, and African American and Black diasporic culture more broadly. From his preacher-prophet-badman-signifying rhetoric to his assertion of reliance on ancestral wisdom, Staggerlee is a voice firmly rooted in the collective, self-determined, and ungovernable Black radical tradition of spiritual, epistemic, and pragmatic resistance to Euro-American violence and its ideologies.

Despite its predominantly sarcastic, angry, and disenchanted tone, the poem ends on a hopeful note that points toward the humanizing potential of fugitivity. Unlike in traditional versions of his legend, Baldwin's Staggerlee does not kill and dethrone the devil at the end of his toast. In the final stanza of the poem, having said "Godspeed" to his white audience, the now collective Black speaker announces that "the niggers … wish you well / but decline to imitate the Son of the Morning, / and rule in Hell."[87] The hypermasculine, violent, individualist, and power-hungry paradigm of change is not, Baldwin tells us, the path to liberation for either his Black or white "kinsmen." Circling back to his criticism of the "Big Boy," atomically aggressive yet ultimately infantile masculinity of Reagan—evoked here through the subtle connotation between "Son of the Morning" and the "morning in America" slogan of Reagan's presidential campaign—and contradicting his own earlier praise of Bobby Seale's "badman" masculinity, Baldwin finishes the poem with an image of Staggerlee as a fugitive from the myth that binds him. In this, both Staggerlee and "the niggers" he represents are liberated from their archetypical functions and, thus, humanized. If there is a way out of the hellscape of American imperialism and racial capitalism, the poem seems to suggest, it will not be found in any clear, dogmatic guidelines for liberatory change but, rather, in a state of constant creative becoming and an ever-open space of possibility marked by an oppositional political consciousness and fugitive humanism. "It is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us—'from the evil that is in the world,'" Baldwin proposed back in 1955 in "Everybody's Protest Novel."[88] Almost three decades later, by liberating Staggerlee from the shackles of inhumanity that had bound Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, he enacts the essay's closing imperative: "Our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it."[89]

On the volume's publication in 1983, the radical and fugitive voice of *Jimmy's Blues* did not find a welcoming audience, with one of the few contemporary reviewers dismissing it as "haunted by the rhetorical ghosts of Black Power."[90] The cultural nationalist overtones of the opening poems, "Staggerlee wonders" and "Song (for Skip)," did not quite match the *de rigueur* thematic and aesthetic expectations for African American poetry in the early 1980s, set up by the decline of the political momentum of Black Power and the emergence of the "reconstruction of instruction" school of literary criticism that placed "considerable emphasis on what is literary (as opposed to sociological, ideological, etc.) in Afro-American letters."[91] This approach privileged poets whose work, as Charles Henry Rowell describes it, "reflected their individual lives, their own families, and the communities they know," and seemed to pay no heed to the "political and social dicta from blacks and whites commanding them on what and how to write."[92] The silence around the publication of a poetry collection by an author long recognized precisely for "what is literary," personal, and nondogmatic in his prose is quite ironic, given that the poems in *Jimmy's Blues* do, as Rowell puts it, "raise questions that plague all humanity" in a language that is open to "experiment with any literary or cultural form that a poem demands."[93] It seems that Baldwin's poetic explorations of love, sexuality, longing (as in "Munich" or "Guilt, Desire, and Love") and, even more prominently, soul-searching in the face of death and the passing of time ("The Darkest Hour," "Inventory/On Being 52," "Conundrum," "Amen") were overshadowed by the perceived militancy of the two opening poems. Today, Baldwin's continued impact on Black poetry, from the formation of the Dark Room Collective in response to his death to Jericho Brown's vulnerable, queer, and political poetics of love, certainly speaks to the lasting currency of his vision to the shape of African American poetry to come.

But as much as Baldwin's poems encourage us to look forward, they also remind us—as much of his writing does—that this movement must be accompanied by a critical and analytical look back, into the tradition and a past that is individual as well as collective. In a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, Baldwin recalls how, in his early youth, he was "ashamed of the blues and ashamed of the jazz"; but then listening to Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues" in Switzerland made him realize that that was "the way [he wanted] to write."[94] With *Jimmy's Blues*, he writes himself into the musical tradition of "Bessie's Blues," "Billie's Blues," and countless others. The subsequent recording of selected poems as an album with musical accompaniment by David Linx and Pierre Van Dormael, released in 1987 as *A Lover's Question*, introduced the world to yet another Baldwin: the bluesman. But Baldwin's blues poetics is also a continuation of his long, complicated engagement with the Black American literary tradition. In his discussion of blues epistemology, Woods traces the "lineage of blues aesthetic criticism" to Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Amiri Baraka, among others.[95] All three writers played important roles in Baldwin's personal and professional life, from his often strained relationship with Wright as both mentor and subject of his first major literary critique, through intellectual exchanges with Brown at Howard University in the 1950s, to his fluctuating relationship with Baraka who, eventually, delivered a eulogy at his funeral. Baldwin's use of Staggerlee as the opening voice of *Jimmy's Blues* brings to mind, and implicitly enters a critical conversation with, the many Black male characters and speakers present in these writers' work, most prominently with the badman persona oft-employed by Brown in his blues poetry.

Guided by the blues as both an aesthetic and epistemology, Baldwin's poetry is an expression of his perennially shifting spiritual and political self-definition, an exploration of a cosmopolitan life lived with an internationalist consciousness. In many ways, his blues poetics follows the fugitive understanding of resistance, revolution, and radicalism that he had presented back in 1968 in his essay on "Black Power":

> When a black man, whose destiny and identity have always been controlled by others, decides and states that he will control his own destiny and rejects the identity given to him by others, he is talking revolution … [And] if this country cannot hear and cannot change, then we, the blacks, the most despised children of the great Western house, are simply forced, with both pride and despair, to remember that we come from a long line of runaway slaves who managed to survive without passports.[96]

By becoming a published poet at the age of almost 60, Baldwin once again rejected "the identity given to him by others" and ventured out, with or without a passport, into the land of "new" ways of using language to appeal to his readers. The idiom and ethos of the blues inscribe him into the Black radical tradition of fleeing "the great Western house" to become a fugitive, living on the outskirts of the now global plantation system on his own, oppositional terms. The recent turn in Baldwin criticism to his previously neglected later work, including his poetry and his engagement with radical politics, will doubtlessly help us "complete his portrait," as D. Quentin Miller puts it in his argument for the significance of "James Baldwin, Poet."[97] However, the beauty of this portrait perhaps also lies in the impossibility of its completion and our acceptance that, by the time we think we have reached him, Baldwin, ever the fugitive, is always already in another country.

Notes

1 Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Today* (New York, Penguin Random House, 2020), p. 6.

2 These include, most notably, D. Quentin Miller, "James Baldwin, Poet," in D. Quentin Miller (ed.), *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2000), pp. 233–54, and Meta DuEwa Jones, "Baldwin's Poetics," in Michelle Elam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 41–55. Cecil Brown's book *Stagolee Shot Billy* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2003) includes a chapter on "Staggerlee wonders" informed by the author's personal discussions of the poem with Baldwin as he was writing it in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. Additionally, Robert Reid-Pharr offers a brief contextual analysis of "Black Girl Shouting," an early Baldwin poem published in 1942 in his high school journal, *The Magpie*. See 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), pp. 126–38.

3 Neither Douglas Field's *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015) nor Joseph Vogel's *James Baldwin and the 1980s: Witnessing the Reagan Era* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2018), engage with Baldwin's poetry beyond offering fragments of "Staggerlee wonders" as epigraphs; Ed Pavlić's *Who Can Afford to Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016) only mentions his poetry in the endnotes; Magdalena Zaborowska's *Me and My House: James Baldwin's Last Decade in France* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018) refers to it a couple of times in passing, and Bill Mullen's *James Baldwin: Living in Fire* (London, Pluto Press, 2019) very briefly touches upon "Staggerlee" as a critique of American ideals of masculinity.

4 Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, p. 84.

5 James Baldwin, in Sedat Pakay (dir.), *James Baldwin: From Another Place*, Hudson Film Works, 2000, qtd. in Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, p. 3.

6 Field, *All Those Strangers*, pp. 115, 116; Mullen, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*, p. xiv.

7 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 304; Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018).

8 Moten, *Stolen Life*, p. 194.

9 James Baldwin, "Notes on the House of Bondage" (1980), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 800, 807.

10 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Knopf, 1994), pp. 359, 360.

11 James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues" (1964), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 57.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

14 Amiri Baraka, "The 'Blues Aesthetic' and the 'Black Aesthetic': Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture," *Black Music Research Journal*, 11:2 (1991), 106, 101; Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London, Verso, 1998), p. 20.

15 Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 4.

16 Stephen E. Henderson, "The Blues as Black Poetry," *Callaloo*, 16 (1982), 22.

17 LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" in Angelyn Mitchell (ed.), *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1994), p. 171.

18 James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes" (1955), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 7.

19 James Baldwin, "Letters from a Journey" (1963), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 195; James Baldwin, "A Report from Occupied Territory" (1966), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 737.

20 Angela Y. Davis, "I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality and Domesticity," in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, ed. Joy James (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 1998), p. 252.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

22 Henderson, "The Blues as Black Poetry," 28.

23 James Baldwin, "Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y.S.)," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2014), p. 26.

24 Baldwin, "Letters from a Journey," p. 195.

25 Baldwin, "Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y.S.)," pp. 26, 28.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 Baldwin, "Letters from a Journey," p. 195.

30 Baldwin, "Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y.S.)," pp. 28, 29.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

33 James Baldwin, "Le sporting-club de Monte Carlo (for Lena Horne)," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, p. 40.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Cheryl A. Wall, "Stranger at Home: James Baldwin on What It Means to Be an American," in Cora Kaplan and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 44.

36 *Ibid.*

37 James Baldwin, "Song (for Skip)," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, p. 21; James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village" (1955), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 125.

38 Mullen, *James Baldwin: Living in Fire*, p. xiii.

39 Baldwin, "The Creative Process" (1962), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 672.
40 Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 9; James Baldwin, "A Lover's Question," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, p. 62.
41 Baldwin, "A Lover's Question," p. 61.
42 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
43 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
44 Baraka, "The 'Blues Aesthetic,'" 105.
45 Field, *All Those Strangers*, p. 142.
46 Baldwin, "A Lover's Question," p. 60.
47 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
48 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, p. 346.
49 Baldwin, "A Lover's Question," p. 63.
50 *Ibid.*
51 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, p. 340.
52 William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989), p. xii.
53 Moten, *Stolen Life*, pp. 194, 193.
54 Baldwin, "Song (for Skip)," p. 24.
55 James Baldwin, "Confession," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, p. 33.
56 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1985), pp. 123–4.
57 Woods, *Development Arrested*, p. 30.
58 Baldwin, "Notes on the House of Bondage," p. 799; James Baldwin, "The Last Interview," by Quincy Troupe (1987), in *The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York, Melville House, 2014), ebook.
59 Robin D. G. Kelley, "Foreword," in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, rev. ed. (1983; repr., Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. xvi–xvii.
60 James Baldwin, "*A Lonely Rage* by Bobby Seale" (1978), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 235.
61 James Baldwin, "Staggerlee wonders," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, p. 5.
62 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
63 James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" (1985), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 815.
64 Baldwin, "Staggerlee wonders," p. 3.
65 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
66 *Ibid.*
67 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
68 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
69 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
70 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
71 Bill Lyne, "God's Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin's Black Radicalism," *Science & Society*, 74:1 (2010), 28.
72 James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 474.
73 Baldwin, "Staggerlee wonders," p. 17.
74 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 475.
75 Baldwin, "Staggerlee wonders," p. 14.
76 *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 12.

77 *Ibid*., p. 17.

78 Darryl C. Thomas, "Cedric J. Robinson's Meditation on Malcolm X's Black Internationalism and the Future of the Black Radical Tradition," in Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (eds.), *Futures of Black Radicalism* (London, Verso, 2017), ebook.

79 Baldwin, "Staggerlee wonders," p. 7.

80 *Ibid*., p. 12.

81 *Ibid*.

82 Baldwin, *Fire Next Time*, p. 334.

83 James Baldwin, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear" (1962), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 34.

84 Baldwin, "Staggerlee wonders," p. 19.

85 *Ibid*.

86 Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy*, p. 209.

87 Baldwin, "Staggerlee wonders," p. 19.

88 James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1955), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 16–17.

89 *Ibid*., p. 18.

90 Qtd. in Miller, "James Baldwin, Poet," p. 236.

91 Robert B. Stepto, "Introduction," in Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto (eds.), *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (New York, Modern Language Association of America, 1979), p. 1.

92 Charles Henry Rowell, "Writing Self, Writing Community: An Introduction," in Charles Henry Rowell (ed.), *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2013), p. xl.

93 *Ibid*., pp. xlii, xli.

94 James Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses His Book, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*," interview by Studs Terkel (1961), Studs Terkel Radio Archive, https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/james-baldwin-discusses-his-book-nobody-knows-my-name-more-notes-native-son (accessed July 22, 2022).

95 Woods, *Development Arrested*, p. 20.

96 James Baldwin, "Black Power" (1968), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, pp. 81, 85.

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