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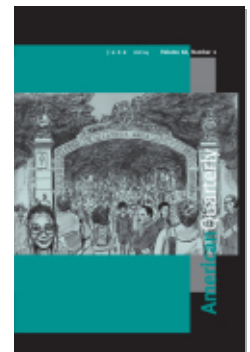
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James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the *Blues for Mister Charlie*

Koritha Mitchell

Many American studies scholars consider James Baldwin one of the nation's most important authors and most incisive cultural critics. In a forty-year career, spanning 1947 to 1987, he relentlessly critiqued U.S. capitalism and the alienation created by its sustaining ideologies, especially racism and (hetero)sexism. Working during the same decades in which American studies built its foundation, Baldwin shared the concerns of the field's early practitioners, but he also anticipated the directions that succeeding generations would deem necessary. He examined the meaning of "Americanness," but immediately found it to be inflected by race, class, gender, and sexuality.¹ Baldwin argued that Americans' self-conceptions relied on mythology that ignored the violence and injustice of the nation's past and present. Namely, fair play seemed to be a guiding principle only because many were seduced by national fantasies. The American artist and critic therefore needed to expose those myths and urge citizens to relinquish them. Only by facing reality, Baldwin maintained, could Americans grapple with the injustice of social hierarchies and thereby recognize their connection to one another. As he made a mission of deconstructing false consciousness, he wrote fiction, nonfiction, drama, and poetry, refusing to confine himself or his vision.

Baldwin is best known for fiction and nonfiction, given the immediate success of his novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *Another Country* (1962) and his essay collections *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), but his commitment to resisting dehumanizing social categories was also linked to his engagement with theater. Though scholars have been slow to recognize this fact, the stage was both a critical and a creative site for Baldwin. For example, he developed his drama *The Amen Corner* over ten years, writing and workshopping it between 1955 and 1965; he wrote a stage version of *Giovanni's Room* in 1958 while collaborating with the Actor's Studio; and he penned his controversial play *Blues for Mister Charlie* in 1963, struggled to have it produced in 1964, and marshaled support to prevent its premature closing. In 1969 and 1970, as detailed in *James*

Baldwin's Turkish Decade, he directed another playwright's work in Turkey.² He also wrote and directed a play about Ray Charles that made July 1, 1973, a historic night at Carnegie Hall.³ Still, perhaps his most unacknowledged engagement with theater came in the form of his longest novel to that point: in 1968 he published *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, which engages his classic themes of identity and love through a protagonist who rarely appears in American literature, a black male stage actor.

Besides these creative encounters with theater, Baldwin addressed the stage in his nonfiction, rounding out his (often-unheralded) contribution to what is now called performance theory. Baldwin's essays consistently engage the meaning-making power of performance, whether in the form of blues and gospel singing or the theatricality of everyday life.⁴ As a result, though they seldom use the performance theory label, scholars routinely note Baldwin's interest in African American music and have begun examining his understanding of photography and television and identifying the contours of his film theory.⁵ When we view Baldwin's engagement with music, television, and film as early examples of performance theory, his investment in theater comes as no surprise. Like his commentary on other types of performance, Baldwin's theater theory develops as an integrated part of his larger project of exposing the delusions that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

When Baldwin's performance theory addresses theater, it seeks to destroy the "sociological and sentimental image" of African Americans that corroborates national fantasies.⁶ As he famously declared in 1951, "It is only in music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the American Negro has been able to tell his story." And too often, the story has been told "in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics" (19). However, in his writing about the stage and in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, the drama that most reflects the investments of his theater theory, Baldwin works to strip away sentimentality and any aesthetic convention that softens the blow leveled by the critique inherent in black life. As he puts it: "To face the facts of a life like Billie [Holiday's] or, for that matter, a life like mine, one has got to—the American white has got to—accept the fact that what he thinks he is, he is not. He has to . . . surrender his image of himself."⁷

Baldwin's theater theory obliterates "protective sentimentality" by locating agency in the black actor, not the audience. In other words, when encountering racialized bodies that perform, he resists the notion that their meaning-making power is constrained by audience perceptions, that they are hopelessly limited by the discourses and practices of a racist nation.⁸ By focusing on the black

actor's creative power, Baldwin uncovers moments when, against all odds, he foils "the American effort to avoid dealing with the Negro as a man."⁹ In fact, Baldwin insists that black stage actors can help U.S. citizens fulfill our greatest ethical duty: to rediscover our connection to each other.

Throughout his career, Baldwin warned Americans that we are all doomed if we continue to deny our relationship to each other. Readers have long recognized this as a key element of his message, but we have tended to overlook the extent to which theater informed, and figured into, his vision. Here, understanding that the ideas that Baldwin makes explicit by the 1970s had been developing for decades, I read anew some of his most famous essays of the 1950s and 1960s to define the contours of his theater theory. After identifying Baldwin's conception of theater, I use it to examine his controversial play *Blues for Mister Charlie* and find that his goals resonated with what Sharon Holland later called "raising the dead."¹⁰ Ultimately, Baldwin believed that the art of theater created a space for fulfilling the ethical mandate to recognize that "we are *all* each other's flesh and blood"—a recognition that Baldwin believes will "re-create" us and the U.S.

The Nation's Love for Illusion, Baldwin's Love for Theater

In *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), Baldwin describes the stage in these terms: "This tension between the real and the imagined *is* the theater, and it is why the theater will always remain a necessity. One is not in the presence of shadows, but responding to one's flesh and blood: in the theater, we are re-creating each other" (501).¹¹ In Baldwin's estimation, the essence of theater (especially as opposed to film) is the tension between the real and imagined, but how are these concepts defined? On the most basic level, the real and imagined correspond to the physical and mental, and Baldwin is interested in how the theater merges the two in order to create its effects. The character represented on stage seems real, but the audience knows that the actor is not, for example, a Scottish king. Because the actor is not a Scottish king, the physical world stands in opposition to the illusion offered onstage. In fact, the physical world threatens to expose that illusion. Yet the illusion projected and received is made manifest through the physical. That is, the actor who is not a Scottish king uses his body to put the king onstage.

The fact that the actor both is and is not a king defines the theater experience. Writing before performance studies developed a vocabulary for the phenomenon that I am roughly sketching,¹² Baldwin works to identify what

creates the push and pull, the give and take, between the real and imagined. According to Baldwin, the audience experiences the tension between the real and imagined as the actor foregrounds the connection between self and other. Baldwin's ideal actor brings the character to life while remaining recognizably himself. Determining whether and how an actor accomplishes this feat relies on intangibles, to be sure. Nevertheless, Baldwin insists that he has been transformed by actors capable of this simultaneity. And in Baldwin's view, the actor who can project a fictional character while remaining true to his own lived experience demonstrates the capacity to recognize the connection between self and other.

For Baldwin, this is the highest of achievements because it has become so rare and because it is the key to rediscovering the truth that Americans have ignored by opting to live according to invented categories and disconnected fantasies. Though humans share common flesh, much has been done, especially in the United States, to deny and conceal this fact. Social and racial categories have been constructed to ensure that we do not recognize each other as brothers and sisters, and they have been largely successful. Indeed, as Baldwin surveys U.S. history, whites have fathered black children, and the nation has made it "mandatory—honorable—that white father should deny black son."¹³ The country therefore operates in ways that ignore physical realities.

Baldwin is interested in a corporeal truth, not an abstract conception of humanism or brotherly love. As he argues in many contexts, black and white Americans are blood relatives. Therefore, "what we call a race problem here is not a race problem at all: to keep calling it that is a way of avoiding the problem. The problem is rooted in the question of *how one treats one's flesh and blood, especially one's children*. The blacks are the despised and slaughtered children of the great Western house" (*No Name*, 469; emphasis added). Because blacks and whites in the United States are in "a *blood* relationship," they cannot separate; they are bound together. After all, "you can't deny your brothers without paying a terrible price for it. And even then they are still your brothers."¹⁴

Baldwin insists that ignoring physical realities is dangerous; when an individual's (or a nation's) thought-world ceases to be ethically accountable to the physical world, harmful illusions emerge. Early in his career, Baldwin insisted that the so-called Negro is really "a series of shadows."¹⁵ In fact, "one may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our own minds" (*Notes*, 19). As a result, Baldwin had learned that "to be a Negro meant, precisely, that one was never looked at but was simply at the mercy of the reflexes the color of one's skin caused in other people" (*Notes*, 68). Baldwin

suggests that film encourages a similar disconnect because the audience is “in the presence of shadows.” In fact, if the viewer feels close to the film actor, that intimacy is a fantasy of his or her own creation (*Devil*, 500). Baldwin therefore insists that when he was introduced to the movies, it was really the discovery of “the cinema of my own mind” (*Devil*, 483).

If film offers shadows and corroborates viewers’ fantasies, Baldwin values the stage because its characters, themes, and events do not exist simply in one’s mind but emerge as the audience engages the actor’s physical presence. Baldwin further articulates his understanding of the art form: “We are *all* each other’s flesh and blood. This is a truth which it is very difficult for the theater to deny, and when it attempts to do so the same thing happens to the theater as happens to the church: it becomes sterile and irrelevant, a blasphemy, and the true believer goes elsewhere—carrying . . . the church and the theater with him” (*Devil*, 501). In declaring that theater will be abandoned when it denies human connections, Baldwin suggests that the stage never allows physical realities to become irrelevant.

Yet Baldwin is optimistic to suggest that theater can hold the imagination accountable to the corporeal; if it can, it will succeed where everyday encounters fail. After all, those who had met Baldwin on the street and had seen only “a Negro” were not responding to anything real about him but reacting to images in “the darkness of [their] own minds.” In truth, there is no guarantee that theatergoers will recognize their ties to others, but theater’s potential for making these connections felt—as it foregrounds the tension between real and imagined, between self and other—leads Baldwin to invest in it. If (as Baldwin says) the theater “will always be a necessity,” it is because, whether or not we admit it, we need connection.

Achieving human connection *re-creates* us by restoring us to an originary and truer state of shared humanity; after all, we have become strangers only by accepting invented social categories that deny biological truth. Baldwin is convinced that despite the social hierarchies that divide us, what each of us really wants is other people’s acceptance. As a result, “a human being can only be saved by another human being.”¹⁶ At our core, we know this, Baldwin would suggest, and this unspoken knowledge drives us all to grasp “with fearful hope, the unwilling, unloving human hand” (*Nothing*, 700). In this grasping, both the person reaching and the one who does not necessarily want to be reached need salvation, and with a touch, they will save *each other*. Yet, even as Baldwin insists that our need for each other is intense and inescapable, he is not naive. He continues, “I am aware that we do not save each other often. But I am

also aware that we save each other some of the time” (*Nothing*, 700). Baldwin’s personal experiences, discussed in the next section, have shown him that actors are capable of not only reaching others but also encouraging them to reach out as well, so he puts some of his own “fearful hope” in theater’s potential.

If human commonality is such a basic truth, though, why do we need special circumstances, such as a theater with talented actors, to recognize it? Put simply, the nation has been built on myths that bolster white supremacy. Thus a black child educated in the United States is “assured by his country and his countrymen that he has never contributed anything to civilization—that his past is nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured.”¹⁷ All citizens are encouraged to believe that racial hierarchy results from each group’s merit, not deliberate injustice. That is, “education is a synonym for indoctrination, if you are white, and subjugation, if you are black” (*No Name*, 389). Thus “race” is an invention, but it has been (and continues to be) invested with particular meanings so that it can justify inequality. Baldwin would therefore never suggest that race can be ignored; it materially affects people’s life chances.¹⁸ Understanding this, Baldwin demands that we rediscover our human connection—that we find ways to see that we *really* are each other’s flesh and blood. Had our history been shaped by this recognition, the nation would not have made it “mandatory” and “honorable” for white fathers to deny their black children. For Baldwin, the ideologies and practices that conceal our familial bonds are not without consequence, but he will not grant that they are based on anything real.

On this point, Baldwin’s ideas resonate with Hortense Spillers’s distinction between the liberated *flesh* and the captive *body*.¹⁹ According to Spillers, the liberated flesh is “that zero degree of social conceptualization” (206). So, before there was ever a body, there was flesh. Spillers explains that, in the New World, the first task of social conceptualization was to divide humans into the invented categories of *free* and *enslaved*. Thus liberated flesh was transformed into “the body” through hierarchies and the discourses that legitimated them. That body could then be marked as “captive” and defined in ways that justified and perpetuated captivity. Speaking of the era of segregation, rather than legalized slavery, Baldwin nevertheless insists that the processes of American socialization continue to be dictated by an investment in denying the existence of our common *flesh*, and instead acknowledging only marked *bodies*.

In other words, Americans have refused to engage in reality—the fact that we are all related; the country instead pretends that people can be meaningfully differentiated as *white* and *black*, *worthy* and *unworthy*. These tendencies have

brought the nation to the point where evil is so commonplace that Baldwin says that he sees Satan everywhere. He declares, “I have seen the devil, by day and by night, and have seen him in you and in me: in the eyes of the cop and the sheriff and the deputy, the landlord, the housewife, the football player: in the eyes of some junkies, the eyes of some preachers . . . in the eyes of my father, and in my mirror. *It is the moment when no other human being is real for you, nor are you real for yourself*” (*Devil*, 571; emphasis added). In short, most have allowed illusions, and the hatred that they produce, to overpower their humanity. Most have let the lies of social and racial status overwhelm their connection to others.

Recognizing the assumptions under which the majority of his countrymen operate, Baldwin nevertheless insists, “Neither of us, truly, can live without the other” (*Devil*, 571). Baldwin believes that if the United States is to survive in the future, its citizens must relinquish their attachment to social and racial distinctions. Pleading in *The Fire Next Time* with Americans of all hues, Baldwin warns, “one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion—and the value placed on the color of skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion” (346). Baldwin knows that it is much easier to relegate each other and ourselves to disconnected fantasies than to see and feel our human connection, so when he challenges his readers to liberate themselves from color, he admits, “I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time . . . the impossible is the least that one can demand” (*Fire*, 346).²⁰

As he works throughout his career to find ways to enable people to do this impossible work, Baldwin eventually places faith in theater. Because we have been socialized not to feel like kith and kin, recognizing our connection requires a healthy imagination, but we cannot allow our imaginations to roam free of physical reality—the most important aspect of which is that we are all each other’s flesh and blood. It takes work to conceive of oneself as human flesh rather than as a marked body. Baldwin therefore places a premium on what I would call *flesh-centered imaginative work*—the intellectual labor that allows one to push past the categories that society encourages but that occurs in embodied ways; it is intellectual work that enables transcendent movement even as it takes place through the body.²¹

The stage is a place where flesh-centered imaginative work is both encouraged and modeled. The successful actor demonstrates for other citizens the ability to recognize the link between self and other. He or she is unmistakably him- or herself while bringing a character to life; thus both figures emerge: real, embodied, palpably present. In Baldwin’s conception of theater at least,

this process works something like this: the actor looks within to discover his connection to the character. Because he sees that connection, he is able to bring that character to life, but he does so without compromising his own identity or lived experience, precisely because they are the basis of his connection to the character's humanity. Onstage, this actor is both himself and someone else, without ever ceasing to be one or the other. Because Baldwin's ideal actor never attempts pure illusion, never attempts to present only the character, he highlights the tension between real and imagined.²² Also, because he is physically present, not on a screen, the audience can appreciate the duality embodied onstage, the tension between the imagined character and the real person portraying him. Cognizant of this duality, spectators do not simply accept staged events as real; they choose to become engrossed in the story even while aware of the physical truth that contradicts it. While viewers' minds are thus engaged, their bodies are also fully present and capable of responding to their ties to the humanity of the figures encountered, both the character and the actor. That is, before viewers' socialization can suggest that those onstage are of no relation to them, their flesh can viscerally register the human connection.

The Source of Baldwin's Optimism about the Stage; or, How Theater "Re-Created" Baldwin

Baldwin would have individuals' imaginations to absorb—and be shaped by—the knowledge of their (physical and real) link to others. As he privileges the merging of the physical and metaphysical, Baldwin posits the stage actor as an honorable laborer for humanity. Baldwin's respect for stage actors develops over time, however. He reaches his conclusions about the actor's power only after realizing—in hindsight—how profoundly the stage had figured in his own decision to become a preacher and then leave the ministry three years later. Baldwin wrote about entering and exiting the pulpit throughout his career, but as he writes in 1976, he comes to believe that theater had been central to both decisions, concluding that a black actor's portrayal of Macbeth drove him into the pulpit at age fourteen and another's rendering of Bigger Thomas gave him the strength to leave the church at age seventeen.

Baldwin's first theater experience prompted him to take refuge in the church; it was the 1936 production of *Macbeth* with an all-black cast, commonly known as "Voodoo" *Macbeth* (*Devil*, 499).²³ He recalls that his conversion occurred soon thereafter,²⁴ precisely because the production convinced him that he was not so different from those onstage, which in turn led him to believe that he

was similar to those who lived in his neighborhood. Baldwin says that, while watching, he had been keenly aware that “the actress (the colored lady!) who played Lady Macbeth might very well be a janitor, or a janitor’s wife, when the play closed, or when the curtain came down. Macbeth was a nigger, just like me, and I saw the witches in church, every Sunday, and all up and down the block, all week long” (*Devil*, 504). Baldwin believed that the people onstage were probably just like those in his everyday life.²⁵ Just as important, these people were not so different from each other. The witches onstage reminded him of church ladies and ladies on the street, including prostitutes. This stage performance therefore made the distinctions between street women and church women much less convincing to young Baldwin. Also, he could no longer draw a line between himself and those who were considered “corrupt.” If he were not fundamentally different, he could as easily become a pimp or racketeer as those around him; fearing this fate, he became a boy preacher.

Seeing resemblances between the actors and his neighbors was only the beginning, though. Baldwin insists that it was important not only that these characters (Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) were represented by familiar faces but that those otherwise ordinary people had transformed themselves to embody what Shakespeare had created so long ago. Baldwin continues, “At the same time [that is, at the same time that he knew the actress might be a janitor], the majesty and torment on that stage were real: indeed they revealed the play. They were those people and that torment was a torment I recognized, those were real daggers, it was real blood, and those crimes resounded and compounded, as real crimes do” (*Devil*, 504). In suggesting that the pain and dignity depicted felt real, Baldwin insists on acknowledging the actors’ imaginative labor. They became “those people” (the characters) because they had done the work to connect their own humanity to the humanity of those whom Shakespeare had described.²⁶ As Baldwin explains elsewhere, “One can only face in others what one can face in oneself.”²⁷ As Baldwin identifies that achievement, he declares that it had not been an accident that “I was carrying around the plot of a play in my head, and looking, with a new wonder (and a new terror) at everyone around me, when I suddenly found myself on the floor of the church . . . crying holy unto the Lord. Flesh and blood had proved to be too much for flesh and blood” (*Devil*, 504).

As Baldwin describes “Voodoo” *Macbeth* this way in 1976, he suggests that the tension between the real and the imagined had had a profound effect on his young psyche: the faces that Baldwin encountered on his block suddenly seemed different because the theater had altered his sense of his connection



Figure 1.

Photograph of 1936 production of Orson Welles's "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, which Baldwin says had a profound effect on him. Courtesy of Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress (016.00.00).

Lady Macbeth, the witches. Baldwin insists, "They could *be* Macbeth only because they were themselves" (*Devil*, 504). In short, the actors stood in the center of the tension between the real and imagined because they embodied the link between self and other.

Baldwin's connecting his conversion to his theater experience represents an evolution in his thinking about this period in his life; his earlier account does not at all foreground theater. When speaking of that fateful summer in *The Fire Next Time* (1962), he says that his new perspective toward his surroundings had come about almost inexplicably:

I became, during my fourteenth year, for the first time in my life, afraid—afraid of the evil within me and afraid of the evil without. What I saw around me that summer in Harlem was what I had always seen; nothing had changed. But now, *without any warning*, the whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue had become a *personal menace*. It had not before occurred to me that I could become one of them, but now I realized that we had been produced by the same circumstances. (296; emphasis added)

to everyone around him. In feeling a connection to the actors, he felt affinity toward who they might be in real life—a janitor, criminal, or church lady as well as to who they had become onstage—Macbeth,

Here Baldwin seems to believe that he had simply begun at age fourteen to understand that he was on the path that the neighborhood criminals had followed, and it was up to him to change direction. However, when he meditates on the difference between theater and film in 1976, he is compelled to rethink that life-changing summer, and his new perspective seems inspired by the various ways in which he engaged theater—writing his own plays, *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mister Charlie*, between 1955 and 1963; being frustrated with the production of the latter; and making his directorial debut in Turkey in 1969–1970. These and other experiences must have helped shape his impressions of theater’s potential, so he begins insisting that the flesh-centered imaginative work of the first stage actors he had seen led him to acknowledge his connection to others. He now concludes that, as a teenager, he sought to avoid the fate of Macbeth and the neighborhood criminals—a fate that he realized could be his own.

From the same retrospective position, Baldwin reports having been transformed three years later when he saw Canada Lee portray Bigger Thomas; this time, theater gave him the “right to live” without religious approval. Again, Baldwin had not initially attributed this decision to a theater experience. When he speaks in *The Fire Next Time* of leaving the church, he simply details “the slow crumbling of [his] faith” (307). He describes being disenchanted by preachers’ hypocrisy and recalls wrestling with the fact that he knew Jews who were more moral and loving than professed Christians (308–9).

When writing *The Devil Finds Work*, however, Baldwin insists on marking theater’s life-changing power by declaring that Canada Lee’s performance of Bigger Thomas challenged him to recognize that his flawed humanity was acceptable, thereby making life outside the church a possibility. The church categorized people based on the abstract value placed on behaviors: those considered holy were on one level and those considered sinners were on another. Lee *re-created* the seventeen-year-old Baldwin by putting him in touch with the life force within him whose value was not determined by whether he followed certain rules.

As he begins marking theater’s role in his decision, Baldwin locates its power in the actor and his flesh-centered imaginative work. In fact, this account identifies three phases of the actor’s influence on Baldwin’s consciousness. First, Baldwin recalls that, as he witnessed Lee’s 1941 performance, he had felt a physical force that he could not have initially explained; second, Baldwin recalls having been impressed by what Lee had created onstage; third, Baldwin insists that Lee had been recalibrating in that 1941 moment young Baldwin’s

thought-world by making a flesh-and-blood connection. All of this, as he looks back while writing in 1976, leads Baldwin to believe that “in the theater, we are re-creating each other.”

Baldwin recalls, “We were in the balcony, and I remember standing up, abruptly and unwisely, when the play ended, and nearly falling headlong from the balcony to the pit. I did not know that I had been *hit so hard*: I will not forget Canada Lee’s performance as long as I live” (*Devil*, 503; emphasis added). Thus the young Baldwin registered the performance in his body. Even before he comes into consciousness about what the performance could mean to him, his flesh registers it. This is the moment of potential that Baldwin becomes willing to invest in—the moment when one’s flesh responds to another’s humanity before one’s socialization can limit the connection felt.

When he enlists his brain to interpret his body’s response, young Baldwin had quickly concluded that it was an appreciation of what Lee had achieved onstage. Mature Baldwin then moves toward greater specificity about the nature of that achievement. This specificity seems to be the result of years of thinking about the “enormous difference between the stage and the screen” (*Devil*, 500). Baldwin persists, “Canada Lee was Bigger Thomas, but he was also Canada Lee: his physical presence . . . gave me the right to live. He was not at the mercy of my imagination, as he would have been, on the screen: he was on the stage, in flesh and blood, and I was, therefore, at the mercy of *his* imagination” (*Devil*, 503). In other words, Lee had already done the intellectual work to see his link to Bigger. As he places it before the audience, Baldwin could suddenly feel his connection to both Lee and Bigger, partly because his flesh registers it viscerally before his mind could insist that he was not at all like the character being portrayed.

Baldwin is impressed, as he looks back, with the extent to which Lee had remained recognizably himself while making Bigger real for the audience. And Baldwin seems to believe that the actor who remains recognizable while becoming another operates out of heightened self-knowledge. Such an actor can bring characters to life because he can connect to the pain, joy, sorrow, and hate of other humans; he does not distance himself from any of what humanity is capable of feeling and wanting. And he can connect to this assortment of emotions and desires in others because he has recognized that range in himself and trusts its validity. As Baldwin contends in another context, “The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can only be oneself” (*Fire*, 312). And, as I have shown, Baldwin believes that truly knowing oneself means knowing that you are connected to all humans, no better and no worse than anyone else.



Figure 2.

Studio portrait of Canada Lee as Bigger Thomas in the 1941 theatrical production of *Native Son*. Carl Van Vechten, photographer. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten collection, LC-USZ62-69955 DLC.

In Baldwin's view, understanding humanity means realizing that no one can claim higher ground; he is anything but sentimental. In numerous contexts, he argues, "most human beings are wretched, and, in one way or another, become wicked" (*No Name*, 374). When Baldwin identifies universals, they are often less than glorious. For example, he insists that when people "are defeated or go mad or die," as they often do, they are victims of the "universal cruelty which lives in the heart and in the world," "the universal indifference to the fate of another," or "the universal fear of love" (*Nothing*, 704). Likewise, he says that real life, reality, is "where all men

are betrayed by greed and guilt and blood-lust and where no one's hands are clean" (*Notes*, 34). Therefore, when Baldwin encourages "the acceptance . . . of life as it is, and men as they are," he adds that "it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace" (*Notes*, 84).²⁸ In other words, Baldwin refuses to nurse delusions about humanity's inherent nobility and goodwill. This tendency is especially illuminating when considering his theater theory.

Baldwin's 1976 articulation of theater's power develops as he acknowledges having identified with Lee's Bigger Thomas—an identification that is striking because he had spent much of his career distancing himself from both Bigger and his creator Richard Wright.²⁹ Baldwin had thought and written about Bigger Thomas many times, but his soul was not touched by Bigger until he viewed him in and through Lee. The actor modeled for Baldwin how to rediscover one's link to others, and much of the lesson had been conveyed and received viscerally. By insisting that he had been *re-created* by Lee's portrayal of Bigger, Baldwin belatedly admits that the actor's embodied imaginative work helped him rediscover his connection to those whom society encourages him to forsake. Before his mind could tell him to distance himself from Bigger, his visceral, human response to Lee's performance *hit him hard*.

Dramatizing the Ethical Mandate: *Blues for Mister Charlie*

If theater should encourage the recognition that we are all each other's flesh and blood, Baldwin's controversial drama *Blues for Mister Charlie* exemplifies his investment in demanding from himself and others the imaginative work that doing so requires. Baldwin vowed to write a drama in 1955, when fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was killed for reportedly flirting with a white woman, but he finished the play after the murder of the civil rights activist Medgar Evers in 1963. In Baldwin's script, Meridian Henry, a widowed black minister, is now grieving the loss of his son, Richard Henry, who is killed before the action begins. Till may have been the inspiration for Richard, but this character is strikingly different from his historical counterpart. An adult Richard had moved to Harlem after his mother's mysterious death and his father's quiet acceptance of it. Richard had been a successful musician in New York, but he returns South to recover from his Harlem lifestyle, which had included drug addiction and endless carousing with white women. Once back South, he refuses to be submissive to whites, including Lyle Britten, a bar owner known for his sexual appetite for black women and his willingness to kill black men. Because the story does not unfold chronologically, the audience sees Richard interact with many of the living characters as they re-live moments that they shared with him.

Baldwin designs the play in ways that merge space, place, and time, creating a layered experience that never pretends that the present can be separated from the past or even that spaces can be meaningfully differentiated when they have been shaped by the same history. The physical set remains largely unaltered, but the location changes many times. Viewers observe events in a church in Blacktown one moment; in Lyle's home in Whitetown, or a courtroom, the next; and all of these spaces are dominated by the country's acceptance of racial categorization. Also, Christianity and the Law bolster racial illusions: according to the stage directions, even when action occurs in a segregated courtroom, "the audience should always be aware of the steeple of the church, and the cross" (1). Baldwin also insists on layers in his treatment of time. Living characters bring the past into the present with their many memories of Richard. And in some cases, scenes in which Richard appears are interspersed with the present—that is, when he is already dead.

Still, the dramatic present is recognizable. Act 1 takes the audience from interactions among student protestors in the black church to exchanges between Meridian and his white ally Parnell James, who has worked to ensure that Lyle will be arrested and tried for Richard's murder. Act 1 also features exchanges between Lyle and his wife. In Act 2, Whitetown residents visit Lyle's home, assuring him that they are outraged that he will be arrested. The third act occurs entirely in the courtroom, and Lyle is ultimately acquitted. The play ends as Meridian and the students are preparing to march in protest. Juanita, the student who had fallen in love with Richard, is approached by Parnell, whose testimony had disappointed the black community. He asks if he can march with them. Juanita answers, "Well, we can walk in the same direction" (121).

Blues for Mister Charlie is a complex play with much more depth than suggested by reviews from the 1960s and by the dearth of scholarly treatments today.³⁰ Though not plentiful, existing scholarship glosses over formal elements that could drastically change appreciation for the play and how it fits into Baldwin's oeuvre and his mission as a writer and witness. Baldwin experiments with form in this unpopular drama to challenge himself and U.S. theatergoers to feel and value connection to others. As he designs the play to encourage audience members to do the intellectual work of pushing past social categories, two elements prove especially demanding. First, the play's startling opening disorients viewers and shapes their experience of the rest of the action. Second, Baldwin offers a formal innovation that scholars have not yet fully engaged: the fact that the character loosely based on Till appears throughout the play despite having been killed before the action begins.

The play's opening sequence highlights what Baldwin believes to be the essence of theater: the audience's awareness of the tension between the real and the imagined, brought about by the actor, who foregrounds the link between self and other. The first person on stage is Lyle Britton, the white man who has killed Richard Henry. The audience sees Lyle dump Richard's dead body as he spews racial epithets at the corpse. Lyle exits, and with little transition, the audience encounters Meridian Henry, a black man who is yelling the same racial epithets as he coaches a young activist on how to taunt his fellow freedom fighters. Meridian, a respected minister and father of the deceased and dumped Richard, insists that Tom, a young black man, must speak with much more fury as he harasses nonviolent protestors. His task is to replicate the hatred that demonstrators will face on the street so that they have real practice in refusing to retaliate when provoked.

Thus the audience is forced to shift abruptly from witnessing the disposal of a dead body, which daily news reports assure them is anything but make-believe, to watching a staged rehearsal that further blurs the line between art and reality. The play opens as follows:

LYLE [WHITE]: And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds! [*Exits.*]

(. . . *The Church [in Blacktown]. A sound of mourning begins. Meridian, Tom, Ken and Arthur.*)

MERIDIAN: No, no, no! You have to say it like you mean it—the way they really say it: nigger, nigger, nigger! *Nigger!* Tom, the way *you* saying it, it sounds like you just *might* want to make friends. And that's not the way they sound out there. Remember all that's happened. Remember we having a funeral here—tomorrow night. Remember why. Go on, hit it again.

TOM: You dirty nigger, you no-good black bastard, what you doing down here, anyway?

MERIDIAN: That's much better. Much, much better. Go on.

TOM: Hey, boy, where's your mother? I bet she's lying up in bed, just a-pumping away, ain't she, boy?

MERIDIAN: *That's* the way they sound!

TOM: Hey, boy, how much does your mother charge? How much does your sister charge?

KEN: How much does your *wife* charge?

MERIDIAN: Now you got it. You really got it now. That's them. Keep walking, Arthur. *Keep walking!*

TOM: You get your ass off these streets from around here, boy, or we going to do us some cutting—we going to cut that big, black thing off of you, you hear?

MERIDIAN: Why you all standing around there like that? Go on and get you a nigger. Go on!

(*A scuffle.*)

MERIDIAN: All right. All right! Come on, now. Come on.

(*Ken steps forward and spits in Arthur's face.*)

ARTHUR: You black s.o.b., what the hell do you think you're doing? You mother—!

MERIDIAN: Hey, hold it! Hold it! Hold it!

(Meridian wipes the boy's face. They are all trembling.)

(Mother Henry enters.)

MOTHER HENRY: Here they come. And it looks like they had a time.

([Students] all Negro, carry placards, enter, exhausted and disheveled, wounded; Pete is weeping. The placards bear such legends as Freedom Now, We Want the Murderer, One Man, One Vote, etc.)

As audience members watch this scene, they must work to orient themselves as the action moves from the disposal of a corpse to an apparent play-within-a-play. Viewers arrive at the theater expecting to suspend disbelief, but there is no denying that whites have killed blacks with exactly the sentiments that Lyle utters. Furthermore, in 1964 when *Blues* was first staged, these truths were virtually inescapable as countless racially motivated beatings were televised. So the authenticity of that dumping is the first jolt; it troubles the audience members' expectations that they have entered a space of make-believe.

Soon, the audience feels even more discomfort as the play offers increasing ambiguity, and Baldwin continues to demand mental acrobatics. Lyle's behavior can be interpreted in a very straightforward manner, but he is immediately replaced onstage by Meridian, whose actions are not easily deciphered. Lyle is a white man spewing hate as he dumps a dead body; the play clearly places him in a negative light. Then, the viewer is confronted with a black man who is aggressively criticizing a younger man. Is this verbal abuse? They are in a church: is this a corrupt preacher? Just as disconcerting, Meridian is criticizing a performance that the audience has not seen. Thus Baldwin denies his viewers the luxury of knowing if we agree with Meridian's performance critique. We have not seen Tom deliver the line unconvincingly; we just hear that it must be improved.

By beginning the action this way, Baldwin pushes viewers to think through their connection to those onstage (i.e., between self and other), and he makes it difficult to allow race to determine one's stance. Lyle offers a certain kind of comfort to the audience. White viewers can immediately distance themselves from him. Knowing that they are more of an ally to African Americans than Lyle, white viewers then expect to sympathize with blacks . . . at least while sitting in the theater watching this show. Likewise, blacks believe that the play's agenda is apparent, to confirm that whites are just as evil as newscasts reveal them to be; they can therefore also expect to identify with the black characters onstage. Both sets of assumptions are disrupted, however, when Meridian basically takes Lyle's place, spewing the same harsh, antiblack language. Just

as importantly, in the play-within-the-play, the young protestors know that Tom is one of them, yet his performance is so powerful that he might as well be Lyle. Tom becomes so convincing as a racist tormenter that Ken begins identifying with white hatred of blacks and spits in Arthur's face.

Baldwin's handling of the opening sequence keeps audience members unsure of who onstage they are willing to identify with, and it demonstrates Baldwin's developing belief that flesh is an important conduit for imaginative work. Meridian sparks this heated moment among the freedom fighters because he is a good director. He insists that for Tom to "say [*nigger*] like you mean it—the way they really say it" (2), he must bear in mind that the church in which they stand will host a funeral the next night. Meridian explains that Tom must do the flesh-centered imaginative work of remembering what has happened so that he can reproduce the hatred that whites embody. But if we take Baldwin's musings on theater and acting seriously, Tom's doing so means encountering the hatred that he himself can embody. For "we are *all* each other's flesh and blood," and "one can only face in others what one can face in oneself" (*Devil*, 501; *Notes*, 136). Here we see Tom doing the same kind of work that Baldwin believes the actor-janitors and Canada Lee had done. He taps into a part of himself that is not necessarily pretty but certainly human. He connects to whites' hatred, and his physical presence helps ignite enough hatred in his friends to start a real fight. Before Ken's intellect can intervene to lessen the human connection felt, he loses himself long enough to spit in his comrade's face.

Not only does the flesh help an actor tap into his connection to a character, but also, when he expresses his imagination through his flesh, it can "hit" viewers before their minds have a chance to slow its impact. Recall, this is what happened to Baldwin, who admits that he did not know he had been "hit so hard" by Lee's performance. Baldwin later places faith in this moment of unknown possibility when our raw humanity reacts before socialization can intervene; that is where Baldwin believes that transformation can happen. It is dangerous and perhaps fleeting, but live theater's capacity for sparking it must be maximized.

Still, the most often-noted but underanalyzed formal element of *Blues for Mister Charlie* is Richard's appearance onstage only after his death. Despite the impression left by most reviews and scholarly treatments of the play, Richard's appearances are not simple flashbacks; rather, he materializes in response to living characters. To understand the difference, note that the play begins with a flashback: the reader/viewer witnesses Lyle dumping a body. Access to this

action is gained through the text, the author. That is, we are privy to this information in the same way that we witness the action of the dramatic present; the playwright has removed the “fourth wall,” simply revealing what happens among characters. In contrast, we encounter Richard only when characters remember him. Audience access to Richard is not a simple removal of the fourth wall; he does not materialize as a function of the text’s depiction of a past event. Rather, Baldwin’s script gives us access to living characters, and those characters periodically seize authorial agency. As they recall Richard’s dynamic life and bear witness to what he meant to them, Baldwin’s dramaturgy enables them to “re-member” Richard’s body, allowing it to emerge onstage, whole and recognizable.

What I want to suggest with this distinction between a flashback and a “re-membering” is that Baldwin uses Richard to usher the audience into what Sharon Holland has theorized as “the space of death.”³¹ In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin is “raising the dead, allowing them to speak, and providing them with the agency of physical bodies in order to tell the story of a death-in-life.”³² When living characters re-member Richard, they become coauthors with Baldwin, and Richard becomes a coauthor with them. Baldwin has removed the fourth wall on the action in the dramatic present, which is where living characters reside, but he makes these characters capable of ushering the audience into another realm, a liminal space that is not the dramatic present, not the past, but rather a space of death. There, living characters hold the power to reveal the time and place that they create with Richard.

In other words, rather than depict Richard through a flashback initiated by and mediated only by the script, Baldwin creates characters who provide the audience with its only access to Richard. Baldwin’s doing so suggests the importance of community in getting at any truth about Richard’s life or death. Baldwin’s text also intensifies the tension of the real and imagined, urging audience members to continue to choose to engage the story—even while aware not only that the actors both are and are not the characters but also that Richard both is and is not dead as he appears onstage in flesh and blood.

In some ways, Baldwin’s creation of the space of death becomes a way to require from his audience less than he will later insist is necessary for accomplishing theater’s greatest work. Rather than challenge the audience to feel its direct connection to Richard, his script simply demands that they continue to engage the action even as they know that Richard is already dead. As they do so, what unfolds before them becomes a model for the human connection that Baldwin will later optimistically claim is inherent in theater. Living characters

enact their connection to Richard; they do the work of seeing their human link to him, both what they like and dislike. In the process, they place onstage his humanity, not just his memory.

Though living characters help put Richard's humanity onstage, his presence confirms their humanity in ways that they may not do for themselves. Richard often articulates truths that are suppressed among the living because they understand that survival often requires silence. In the space of death, Richard declares truths that his community resists, but he could not do so without having been brought forth by those who survived him. Thus, in the space that they inhabit together, Richard and the living confirm each other's humanity, often by acknowledging the pervasiveness of what Karla Holloway calls "black death"—untimely death brought about by racism.³³

To take just one example: once the protestors have calmed down after Ken's outburst and the resulting fight, they begin reminiscing together, singing two of Richard's favorite songs. The second song is accompanied by a transition, described in Baldwin's stage directions as follows, "*Lights dim in the church. We discover Richard, standing in his room, singing. . . . Near the end of the song, Mother Henry enters, carrying a tray with milk, sandwiches, and cake*" (17). The group's memory of Richard's music soon becomes his grandmother's private memory of him singing in his room, where he had returned to recover from his time in Harlem. The conversation that they have when Mother Henry brings him a tray of food—and brings him forth, "re-members" him—is quite revealing. As they communicate in this space of death, it is clear that what had been most important to Richard was telling the truth about his mother's demise. It had always been said that she had fallen down the stairs of the town's hotel, and as they talk, Richard's grandmother continues to insist that it had been an accident. Mother Henry strains, "She fell, Richard, she *fell*. The stairs were wet and slippery and she *fell*" (20). For Richard, this is the same ridiculous lie that he had been told all his life; he won't tolerate it a moment in death. He rejects this story, partly because "them white bastards was always sniffing around my mother, *always* around her—because she was pretty and *black!*" (21). With this, Baldwin uses Richard to bring to bear a long history of sexual exploitation and rape of black women that the nation has ignored. Richard sarcastically asks, "My mother *fell* down the steps of that damn white hotel?" "My mother was *pushed*," he declares angrily (20).

Richard had always refused to disregard his own experience in order to accept the white account of events, and this tendency had helped get him killed. In this exchange, Mother Henry creates a space in which Richard tells truths that

she resists, and it is clear that she counters his declarations because she believes that blacks' well-being depends on it. His grandmother pleads, "Richard, you can't start walking around believing that all the suffering in the world is caused by white folks!" He shoots back, "I can't? Don't tell me I can't. . . . They're responsible for all the misery I've ever seen, and that's good enough for me" (21). Mother Henry declares that Richard is going to make himself sick with hatred, which is a poison. Richard insists, "No, I'm not. I'm going to make myself well. I'm going to make myself *well* with hatred" (21). With this, he not only rejects his grandmother's survival strategy but also insists on linking his mother's death to the other examples of black pain that he has witnessed, including his own drug addiction. He maintains, "I'm going to remember everything. I'm going to keep it right here, at the very top of my mind. I'm going to remember Mama, and Daddy's face that day . . . and all them pimps and whores and gangsters and all them cops. And I'm going to remember all the dope that's flowed through my veins. . . . I'm going to remember all that, and I'll get well. I'll get well" (21).

His testimony is profoundly about his life and the extent to which it was shaped by his mother's death. Indeed, he suggests that his was a death-in-life (Holland's phrase) because he was a black man in the United States forced to witness his father's inability to protect his mother and then watch his own deterioration by way of drugs, just one of the many American forces that conspired to kill him. Remembering all of this, he declares, will allow him to stay off drugs because he recognizes addiction as a continuation of whites' efforts to rob him of life and dignity.³⁴

In calling Richard forth, Mother Henry makes space in the present for this testimony that is so aggressively silenced among the living. Thus Richard does not simply offer access to the past; his keen interpretations of his life experiences make him a coauthor. Not unlike Baldwin's static set and shifting settings, Richard functions to illuminate how the past is actively informing the present, and he works with his living comrades to give voice to his humanity and theirs. As Holland might suggest, because living characters enable Richard's emergence, he is speaking with and for them, saying what the living cannot precisely because Richard's own fate confirms that black survival often depends on silence.³⁵

Yet silencing the truth is a black survival tactic precisely because the nation denies the most fundamental truth, that we are all each other's flesh and blood. Partly because he does not appear as a flashback but as a creative entity in a unique space, Richard illustrates the many ways in which the pain of his

mother's death reverberates. From the space of death, he can now summarize the major lesson that his life in the United States has taught him: "It's because my Daddy's got no power that my Mama's dead. And he ain't got no power because he's *black*" (21). In other words, these crimes have been perpetrated because whites have not seen blacks as flesh of their flesh.

For all that is laid bare about black pain in scenes like this, the text is also relentless in insisting that "Mister Charlie" suffers. The whites who have created the circumstances that constrain black life are also ailing, also poisoned. Despite the shifting of space, place, and time, all of the action occurs in "Plaguetown U.S.A.," and Baldwin insists, "the plague is race" (*Blues*, xv). Baldwin therefore wants to show how ridiculous the concepts black and white are without losing touch with the righteous indignation of those whose life chances have been limited by those illusions.

While Baldwin acknowledges justified anger, he insists that it cannot become an obstacle to valuing human connection. *Blues for Mister Charlie* therefore offers a portrait of the United States that foregrounds the tension between self and other. After all, Plaguetown is made up of "Blacktown" and "Whitetown," designations that suggest that they are opposites whose occupants are not at all related. Yet the neighborhoods are bound together. These names also emphasize the tension between what is real and imagined because they sound fake and ridiculous, yet they represent the reality of everyday lived experience. To call a place "Whitetown" seems contrived, yet history and the present both testify to just how accurate it can be.

Even this simple observation points to the need to analyze *Blues for Mister Charlie* as a text at odds with accepted conventions of realism, and the assessment offered by a fairly liberal *New York Times* critic proves instructive on this point. The theater reviewer Howard Taubman explains, "[Baldwin's] inflexible, Negro-hating Southerners are stereotypes. Southerners may talk and behave as he suggests, but in the theater they are caricatures."³⁶ If admittedly realistic portraits of the attitudes that created the nation's status quo are deemed caricature, what would a black writer or performer need to do in order to be seen as realistic? How could a black author create a portrait that indicts ongoing (not just historic) white racism and have it deemed realistic rather than propagandistic?

Taking this question seriously corroborates the performance theorist Daphne Brooks's contention: "Rather than depending on conventional realist methods to convey the humanity and value of black subjectivity," some black artists favor "dissenting methods of narration and aesthetic articulation."³⁷ Baldwin's

dissension manifests in his refusal to adopt mainstream theater's standards of storytelling, which leads to his dissent from its aesthetic values more generally. Baldwin's method for dramatizing the story of a black man murdered for racially motivated reasons defies expectation, not just because he alters Till's age and circumstances but because he dramatizes what mainstream theater does not necessarily value. Many critics have suggested that *Blues for Mister Charlie* lacks dramatic suspense because Richard's body is dumped at the beginning of the play. This assumes that his being killed by a racist is all that matters. Might Baldwin be interested in giving voice to what Richard meant to his community or to what the community meant to Richard? Might these issues be important? Critics in the 1960s, and scholars since, have proceeded as if these aspects of his story are not particularly worthy of dramatic portrayal. Certainly, they are not the stuff of which realistic plays are made, it would seem. And this, of course, leads to Baldwin's dissension from U.S. theater's aesthetic proclivities. As he says in the note to *Blues for Mister Charlie*, "I did not then [in 1958], and don't now, have much respect for what goes on in the American Theatre. I am not convinced that it *is* a Theatre; it seems to me a series, merely, of commercial speculations, stale, repetitious, and timid" (xiii). He continues, "I certainly did not see much future for me in that frame-work" (xvi).³⁸ Baldwin therefore changes the narrative, aesthetic, and ethical framework as much as possible.

Indeed, the aesthetic and ethical orientation suggested by the play's title is quite radical. Why should Mister Charlie have the blues? More to the point, why should the race that he has victimized sympathize? Not only does Baldwin insist that Mister Charlie is plagued; he is determined to sing the blues for him.³⁹ Clearly, the play emerges from Baldwin's belief that we are all brothers and sisters. Thus Baldwin looks beyond racialized bodies, and the crimes committed to preserve the illusions of race, to see human flesh and suffering. I would say, in fact, that the play is written to issue, and to heed, the counter-intuitive instruction implied by its title.

Yet there is no pretending: singing the blues for Mister Charlie requires serious work. To write the play, Baldwin had to discover his connection to his countrymen, even if they were white murderers, and the note preceding the script indicates that he has done so. Baldwin confesses, "I absolutely dreaded committing myself to writing a play . . . but I began to see that my *fear of the form* masked a deeper fear. That fear was that I would never be able to draw a

valid portrait of a murderer. In life, obviously, such people baffle and terrify me and, with one part of my mind at least, I hate them and would be willing to kill them” (xiv; emphasis added). Here Baldwin shows that he has considered the distance between himself and the murderer . . . and it turns out that it is not so great. He can imagine being capable of murder and finding justifications for his actions. Even as he speaks of white racists, he acknowledges that “no man is a villain in his own eyes” (xiv). In writing the play, Baldwin had committed himself to attempting a valid portrait, which meant seeing the similarity between himself and the play’s racist murderer, Lyle.

As Baldwin looked within to portray Lyle, it is especially important that he did so via drama rather than fiction or nonfiction prose, the forms for which he was famous. According to the cultural historian Jacqueline Goldsby, racial violence often inspires writers to experiment with form because doing so allows them to address the pain of realizing how pervasive such violence is. Goldsby asserts, “Lynching urges writers to breach new depths of creativity because . . . they need to explore the limits of literary form to express what the violence means to them.” Therefore an author’s “interest in literary form is not a resistance to affect but an articulation of it, one that registers how much lynching’s history hurts.”⁴⁰

While Baldwin’s struggle over form registers the personal and communal pain that he must articulate, he also uses that pain to suggest that the persistence of racial violence only indicates that we must rediscover our human connection and save each other as only humans can. *Blues for Mister Charlie* dramatizes the ethical mandate that Baldwin believes we all share, and he was forced to experiment with form to challenge himself and others to answer the call of duty. In the process, the text survives to suggest that American stage realism may be yet another manifestation of the nation’s love for illusion. Therefore resistance to the play may often be an unconscious response to Baldwin’s refusal to cater to those illusions.

James Baldwin disposes of “realistic” literary and dramatic conventions in the same way that he believes we must strip ourselves of socialization. Baldwin would be the first to admit that the work required to appreciate his play—and each other—may seem impossible, but we must nevertheless undertake it. We must see ourselves not as racialized bodies but as human flesh. We must *re-create* each other by clinging to the reality that has become hardest to grasp: we are all each other’s flesh and blood.

Notes

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1. For more on the origin of American studies and revisions to its approaches, see Donald Pease and Robyn Wiegman, *The Futures of American Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); and Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman, *States of Emergency: The Objects of American Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
2. Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).
3. Basic biographical information in this paragraph is from David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994); see especially pages 150, 238–39, 288–91, 319.
4. Baldwin’s interest in performance is woven throughout his work. Just a few examples: when describing an awkward encounter with Richard Wright, he uses theater as a framework (*No Name in the Street* [1972], in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison [New York: Library of America, 1998], 255; hereafter cited as *No Name*); he often speaks of the need for performance in everyday black life (*No Name*, 261); he speaks of the drama and theatricality of the church (*The Fire Next Time* [1963], in Morrison, *James Baldwin*, 306; hereafter cited as *Fire*); he identifies the characteristics of blues performances (*Fire*, 311), and examines Bessie Smith’s tone and cadence (*No Name*, 138).
5. For example, see Josh Kun, “Life According to the Beat: James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, and the Perilous Sounds of Love,” in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 307–28; and Robert Reid-Pharr, “The Powers of Darkness in ‘Sonny’s Blues,’” *CLA Journal* 43.4 (2000): 443–53. Saadi Simawe examines drama through the lens of music in “What Is in a Sound? The Metaphysics and Politics of Music in *The Amen Corner*,” in *Re-viewing James Baldwin*, ed. Quentin Miller (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 12–32. On Baldwin and film, see Ryan Friedman, “‘Enough Force to Shatter the Tale to Fragments’: Ethics and Textual Analysis in James Baldwin’s Film Theory,” in *English Literary History* 77 (2010): 385–411. On Baldwin and photography, which Baldwin understands in relationship to television, see Joshua Miller, “A Striking Addiction to Irrationality”: *Nothing Personal* and the Legacy of the Photo-Text Genre,” in Miller, *Re-Viewing James Baldwin*, 154–89.
6. James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone” (1951), in Morrison, *James Baldwin*, 20.
7. James Baldwin, “The Uses of the Blues” (1964), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 60–61.
8. Baldwin avoids the pitfalls that can come with an emphasis on performativity, Judith Butler’s useful concept for freeing identity from biological assumptions. While appreciating the discursive nature of identification, many worry that Butler’s preoccupation with acts, rather than the people performing them, risks diminishing the agency of socially marginalized subjects. Examples of critiques include Julia Walker, “Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 16.1 (2003): 149–75; and E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 124–57. A similar focus on the agency of performers of color guides contemporary performance theory scholarship, such as José Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and Daphne Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent*:

- Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).
9. James Baldwin, “Theater: The Negro In and Out” (1961), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 17.
 10. Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).
 11. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), in Morrison, *James Baldwin*, 477–572. Hereafter cited as *Devil*.
 12. The field often describes this phenomenon with theories of surrogation, citation, and restored behavior. On surrogation, see Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). On restored behavior, see Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Of course, citation helps mark the intersection between literary theory and performance theory, recognizable foundations laid by J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Butler.
 13. James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie: A Play* (1964; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1995), xv. Hereafter cited as *Blues*.
 14. Fred Standley and Louis Pratt, eds., *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 100. Hereafter cited as *Conversations*.
 15. James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), in Morrison, *James Baldwin*, 19. Hereafter cited as *Notes*.
 16. James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal” (1964), in Morrison, *James Baldwin*, 700. Hereafter cited as *Nothing*.
 17. James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers” (1963), in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 679. Originally published in the *Saturday Evening Review*, December 21, 1963. Hereafter cited as *Teachers*.
 18. Baldwin would not ignore the material consequences of race for those who are “othered” by whiteness. This is why, in a televised interview, Baldwin says to the interviewer (and white America at large): “It’s up to you. . . . ‘Cause as long as you think you’re white, I’m going to be forced to think I’m black” (*The Price of the Ticket*, quoted in Miller, *James Baldwin Now*, 347).
 19. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203–29. Hereafter cited in the text.
 20. Underscoring the difficulty of the human connection work that he values, Baldwin says in another context, “it has always seemed much easier to murder than to change (*Nothing Personal*, 698).
 21. My articulation of Baldwin’s concept is not unlike an idea evolved later by the noted performance theorist Herbert Blau. See *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).
 22. Baldwin’s conception resonates with Bertolt Brecht’s interest in “alienation effects.” However, as much as Baldwin scholars assume that he must have known of Brecht and/or his work, I have not been able to find evidence that would lead me to claim that Baldwin is influenced by Brecht. Queries to a Baldwin scholar Listserv also returned nothing, despite responses from Zaborowska and others.
 23. Baldwin’s memory of this production is imperfect. He says that he saw Paul Robeson play *Macbeth* in 1935, but the all-black production was in February 1936 and the lead actor was Jack Carter. Baldwin’s slip confirms that Orson Welles’s *Macbeth* production tapped into the success of *Emperor Jones*, which had starred Paul Robeson. See Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson, eds., *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
 24. Specifically, Baldwin says that his conversion and his belief that he should preach “came hard on the heels of *Macbeth*” (*Devil*, 502).
 25. Actually, these were professional actors employed by the Works Progress Administration. Also, Baldwin admits that the fact that his first stage experience involved black actors informs his understanding of what theater can accomplish (*Devil*, 500).
 26. In addition to what Shakespeare imagined, Baldwin was watching what Welles had envisioned.
 27. James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), in Morrison, *James Baldwin*, 136. Hereafter cited as *Nobody*.
 28. Baldwin’s resistance to sentimental notions of humanity can be found throughout his nonfiction and interviews, so these are just a few examples. This resistance might be usefully viewed as what Justus

- Nieland calls “noir humanism,” but Nieland does not fully define the concept, especially in relation to Baldwin’s work. Still, the term may prove useful for those interested in pursuing the idea to which Nieland gestures and for which Baldwin provides much material. Baldwin contends, “I think it’s a great mistake to be sentimental about human beings, and to be sentimental about oneself. One doesn’t know what one can do until one does it. If you don’t understand that about yourself and other people, then you can become a missionary, which is one step away from being a tyrant, and you can decide that because you cannot deal with your own life, then you can deal with other people’s lives, and correct them according to some principle which you have yourself not quite understood” (*Conversations*, 105). Similarly, in another context: “No one is more dangerous than he who imagines himself pure in heart” (*Nobody*, 277). (For Nieland’s gesture, see “Everybody’s Noir Humanism: Chester Himes, *Lonely Crusade*, and the Quality of Hurt,” *African American Review* 43.2–3 [2009]: 277–93.)
29. The tension between Baldwin and Wright is well documented by scholars. Baldwin first writes about Bigger in 1949 in an essay titled “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” which focuses its critique on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. He asserts that protest fiction is based on soul-crushing premises. He more directly criticizes Wright’s work in 1951 in “Many Thousands Gone.” In 1955 he begins his essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* with those two essays. Also, Baldwin himself later admits that he had not always related to Wright as a human being. See *Nobody*, 247, 260.
 30. Published scholarship has been scant, but the play is regularly staged at historically black colleges and universities. New Haarleem Arts Theater, associated with City College of New York, staged *Blues* in July 2011, and reviews claimed that the play is rarely “revived.” That is simply not true. Of course, scholarly conversation on Baldwin is robust. At conferences devoted to his work (London, 2007; Suffolk University, 2009; and the Schomburg Center and New York University, 2011), his contributions outside fiction received increasing attention. Still, the most useful published treatments of *Blues* include Nicholas K. Davis, “Go Tell It on the Stage: *Blues for Mister Charlie* as Dialectical Drama,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 17 (Spring 2005): 30–42; and Soyica Diggs, “Historicizing the Sound of a Ghastly Sight: James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie*,” in *Sonic Interventions*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Sylvia Mieszkowski, and Joy Smith (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 193–210.
 31. Holland’s concept builds on Michael Taussig’s anthropology work. See Holland, *Raising the Dead*.
 32. *Ibid.*, 4. For Holland, death can be read “as a cultural and national phenomenon or discourse, as a figurative silencing or process of erasure, and as an embodied entity or subject capable of transgression” (5). This definition makes it especially compatible with the cultural work that I see Baldwin doing through Richard.
 33. Whether killed by lynch mobs, the racist refusal of hospital treatment, or by drugs pumped into the poorest communities, those who die *black deaths* remind us that our society makes untimely death the norm for African Americans. See Karla Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.
 34. As always, Baldwin proves prescient. This understanding of drugs in the United States resonates powerfully with Michelle Alexander’s findings in *The New Jim: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).
 35. As living characters seem to prioritize mere survival, Holland’s contention that the dead visit the living to show them how their “living can be achieved” resonates. Their willingness to pursue life beyond survival seems to increase after interacting with Richard. Coming to this conclusion about the strength that living characters can gain from Richard in the space of death differs dramatically from claiming that Richard does the community more good dead than alive, as Meredith Malburne suggests about him and Emmett Till: “Like Emmett, Richard’s death is dually tragic; not only do both Emmett and Richard need to die under the weighty rules of Southern ‘justice’ (and they are both, indeed, murdered), but they are also, ironically, able to accomplish significantly more through their inevitable deaths than they could be expected to accomplish through their lives.” See Meredith Malburne, “No Blues for Mister Henry: Locating Richard’s Revolution,” *Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 39.
 36. Howard Taubman, “Theater: ‘Blues for Mister Charlie,’” *New York Times*, April 24, 1964.
 37. Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.
 38. These sentiments about the U.S. stage are strikingly different in tone from those expressed in the note to Baldwin’s play *The Amen Corner*. Still, the content is much more similar than the positive

tone leads one to believe. Baldwin states, “Concerning my theatrical ambitions, . . . I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write the play, by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the communion which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, against their will, to shake them up, and hopefully, to change them. I knew that an unknown black writer could not possibly hope to achieve in this forum. I did not want to enter the theatre on the theatre’s terms, but on mine. And so I waited. And the fact that *The Amen Corner* took ten years to reach the professional stage says a great deal more about the American theatre than it says about this author” (14).

Despite the suggestion that *The Amen Corner* production represented some kind of evolution for U.S. theater, that play adheres to conventions of stage realism, unlike *Blues for Mister Charlie*. I contend, then, that the popularity of *The Amen Corner* and the mainstream contempt for *Blues for Mister Charlie* are related to Baldwin’s acceptance of realism’s conventions in the former and his rejection of them in the latter. It also helps that *The Amen Corner* does not directly indict American racism, focusing instead on blacks’ treatment of each other. (I should also note that there is reason to believe that *The Amen Corner* reflects Baldwin’s collaboration with theater practitioners, such as the director Lloyd Richards and Howard University drama professor Owen Dodson. Baldwin trusted their vision for theater to an extent that I think made the play much more conventional than seems to have ultimately been Baldwin’s ideal. See Leeming’s biography for the extensive workshopping of the work that Baldwin allowed.)

39. Baldwin would probably say that the reason whites need someone to sing the blues for them is that they often do not realize that in debasing another, one debases oneself. Also, “white Americans do not understand the depths out of which” the “ironic tenacity” of the blues comes (*Fire*, 311).
40. Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 293–94.