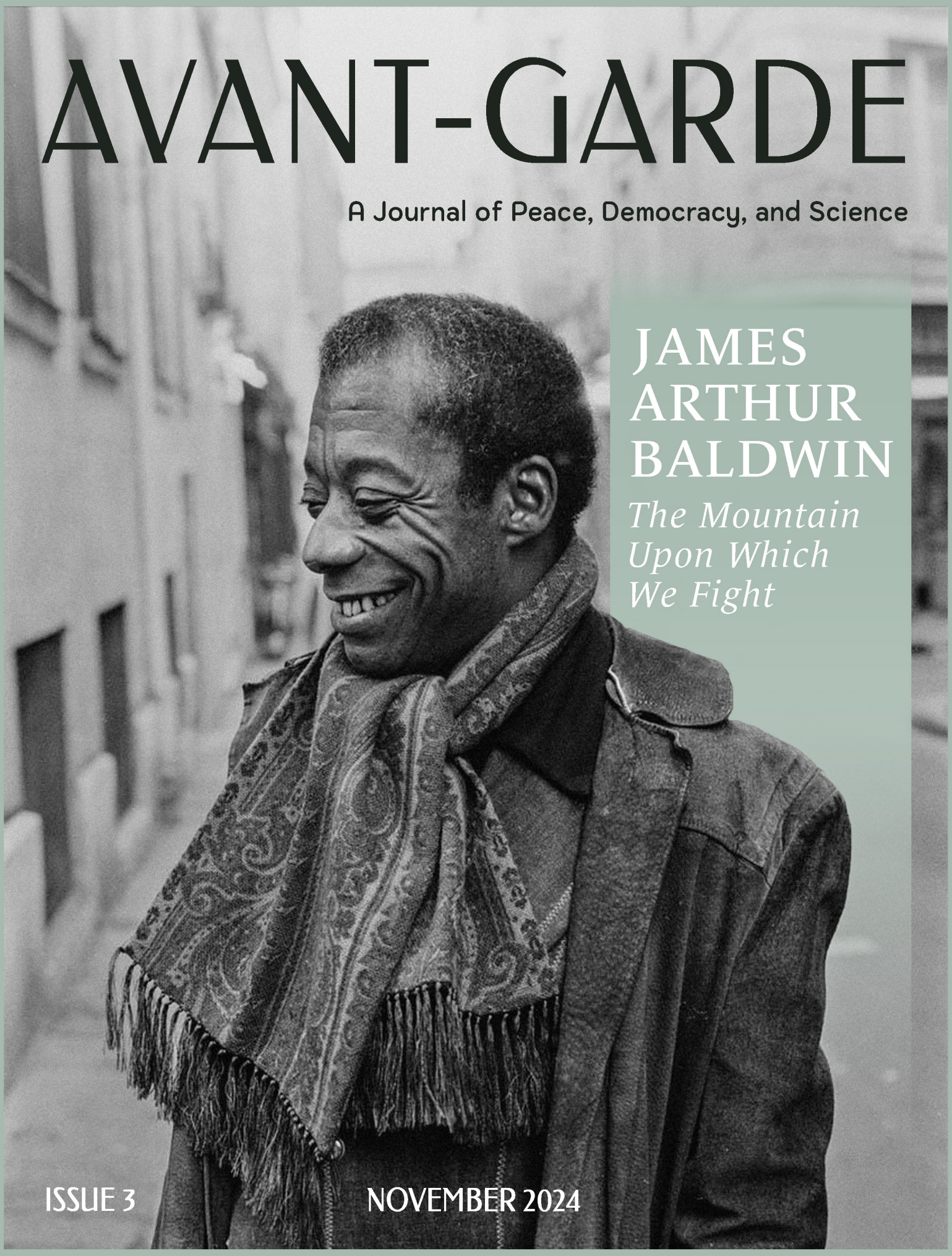
AVANT-GARDE

A Journal of Peace, Democracy, and Science



JAMES ARTHUR BALDWIN

The Mountain Upon Which We Fight

ISSUE 3 NOVEMBER 2024

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Avant-Garde: A Journal of Peace, Democracy, and Science is published by the Saturday Free School for Philosophy and Black Liberation.

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AVANT-GARDE

A complete century has passed since the birth of **James Arthur Baldwin** on August 2nd, 1924 in Harlem. We dedicate the Third Issue of *Avant-Garde* to Baldwin with the conviction that the next 100 years—the lives of our children, and our children's children—may well be defined by his ideas, philosophy, language, and vision of our human future.

James Baldwin was a revolutionary. And not only for his time, but for ours: he sets the standard as an indispensable revolutionary thinker for the 21st century. For those who travel the road in search of profound social change, Baldwin is inescapable.

Small wonder, then, that the ruling class of this country is intent upon dominating the discourse surrounding Baldwin in this year of his centenary. By repackaging him as a fashionable commodity to fill five-minute television segments, they aim to destroy Baldwin and consign him to irrelevance in an imagined past. To this are added efforts to fabricate an image of Baldwin in the mold of a "queer writer," an empty vessel for postmodern identity politics which emanate from elite cultural institutions.

As a seer of the American revolutionary process and a towering philosopher of freedom and consciousness, Baldwin is unknown and unwanted by career intellectuals, bourgeois liberals, and the Marxist Left alike. He is, however, fully known and loved by the people who produced him: the Black proletariat. He remains a prophet of, and for, the Black poor.

Indeed, Baldwin saw himself as a native son of the Black proletariat, an inheritor of his people's journey from slavery to Emancipation and Reconstruction, through Jim Crow and the Great Migration. This chronology imbued Baldwin—as it did W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Charles White, Diane Nash, James Lawson, and many others—with a unique vision into the lifeworld of Black folk, and further: into the vast human problem of America's white supremacist social system.

Armed with this knowledge, Baldwin strode into the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement. As nonviolent armies waged pitched battles across the South and North to transform the public square and penetrate the human heart, so too did he force a rupture in the nation's consciousness: to show white Americans how desperately they were imprisoned by whiteness—a false identity trapped in its own creation of the "inferior" Black race.

Baldwin knew the private lives of his countrymen, Black and white. He laid bare how white supremacy suffocates the democratic capacity of our citizenry, rendering us helplessly dependent upon a murderous regime of laws and myths to give us an infantile sense of reality—shielded from Black suffering, protected from the darker hordes massing at the empire's gates. Today, Baldwin's interrogation of white modernity, of the U.S. state and its pretensions of democracy, must be treated as a theoretical innovation in revolutionary science.

He emerged as God's Revolutionary Voice in the wilderness of American society, bearing witness to the coming of a new people. He spoke of America becoming the Last White Nation: the last great empire, the final standard bearer of the Western epoch, and the bridge leading to far greater democratic vistas—toward a civilization of peace.

The battle over James Baldwin is thus a battle between the people's consciousness and the ideology of the ruling elite. It is furthermore a battle for peace and the possibilities of revolutionary change.

In America and throughout our world, a titanic struggle is now taking place between the old and the new. These are dark days. Clouds of war gather, strike, and kill in Gaza; still greater storms of world war loom on the horizon. Humanity stands aghast at the depravity of Western civilization, whose principal representatives—the American ruling elite and their Zionist accomplices—would precipitate Armageddon in their desperate attempt to hold on to power, to hold back time itself.

Domestically, the United States hangs on the edge of several possibilities: the chasm of civil war, an unending night of prolonged social chaos, or revolutionary change. The American people see their nation in decline; they see and feel suffering everywhere; and in their overwhelming majority, they see their rulers and institutions as totally bankrupt. For the white poor, the wages of whiteness no longer pay as they once did. For the Black poor, the air stings and bleeds with an even more painful sense of betrayal.

No amount of propaganda can disguise the fact that the American empire's hurtling path toward cataclysm and ruin could, in the end, bring the death of the American nation itself.
Here lies the crisis of our time. And it is for this crisis that Baldwin offers answers. For him, the role of the artist was the task of the revolutionary: to reveal the beloved to themselves. Alongside Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin matters today because he reveals to the people their own role as makers of history.

Who will take responsibility for this country and its future? Who will deliver our children from the jaws of a society designed to kill them? Baldwin clarifies the moral choice that compels each of us to say, with full faith: *I will*.

Far beneath the hulking spectacle of any electoral machine, he insisted that true democracy begins in the moral standards to which we hold ourselves. It begins when the despised and discontented realize that the battle of ideas—the scale of the future—belongs to them to decide. It begins, for instance, when a people says they will not pledge allegiance to a political party that proposes "Black freedom" is compatible with war, immiseration, and genocide.

Such is the spirit that fills the **Year of James Baldwin: God's Revolutionary Voice**, the year-long crusade from which this Issue springs. With Baldwin as their meeting ground, the people of Philadelphia and other cities are discovering each other anew—are discovering their common destiny as inheritors of that revolution for which Baldwin stood. If we are to survive the storms ahead, if we are to renew ourselves as a people, it is the values of the Third American Revolution that will take us through.

This was a new type of revolution; it crystallized and birthed new understandings about human beings and their capacity for struggle. We have not yet unearthed the full weight and potential of our inheritance. Yet we do know this: Baldwin, equally with King and all the pioneers of the Black Freedom Movement, devoted his life to Love as the revolutionary antidote to transform an inhuman social order. That work, as Baldwin wrote, is not yet finished.

By the light of these agonizing hours, we pick up the mantle of James Baldwin: for he pierced through the human dimensions of our American problem and spoke, in the clearest terms, to mankind's ongoing quest for freedom. He went to the mountaintop, and we seek to join him there. He is every one of us. Through Baldwin, we press forward into new regions of revolutionary thought.

Mark the time: James Baldwin lives; he breathes; he speaks again.

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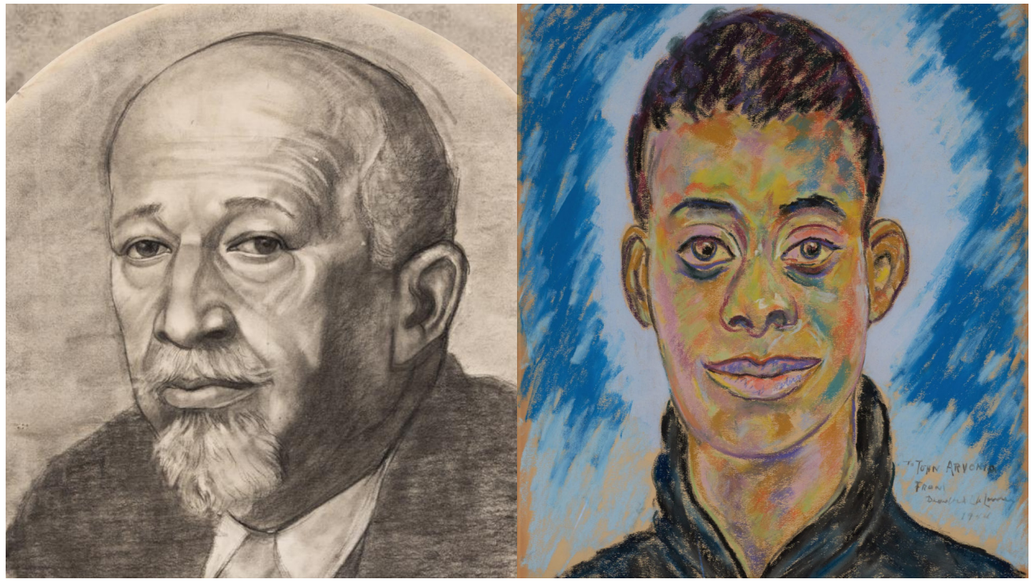
Charles White, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, 1974. Beauford Delaney, Portrait of James Baldwin, 1944.



W.E.B. Du Bois and James Arthur Baldwin, The Mountain Upon Which We Fight

BY ANTHONY MONTEIRO

According to recent polls 70 percent of Americans say the country's political and economic systems should be fundamentally reformed; 15 percent say they should be torn down and replaced with something new. In history such rejections of the political and economic systems are a sign of a pre-revolutionary or civil war situation. They are a *memento mori*, a reminder of the death of a system.

W.E.B. Du Bois and James Baldwin give us intellectual tools to explain this moment. Their combined bodies of work are massive and are, by many measures, the most significant body of revolutionary thought produced in the United States. They are two of the most important thinkers of the modern epoch. Both are thinkers for this time because they provide theoretical and ideological foundations for new and better theory and foundations in the battle of ideas. Both creatively reground thought and theory, presenting alternatives to the civilizational, philosophical, and ideological foundations of Western thought. In the end, their vast bodies of work constitute a revolutionary and epistemic break with liberal and bourgeois assumptions which define the West's worldview. They sought to understand the U.S. social system, what I call the White Supremacist Social System. Deploying different methods for knowing, they produced creative and scientific ways to explain Black folk and what Du Bois called the Black Proletariat. They examined Black folk's moral, social, and revolutionary capacity. Baldwin's *oeuvre* explains Black resistance in the face of white supremacy and whiteness. Baldwin, as much as any American writer, closely examined white Americans and how whiteness and white identity trapped them in delusions about themselves and America.

Each combined revolutionary thinking with commitments to solidarity with the world's peoples. Du Bois is the father of modern sociology and radical U.S. historiography. He is also the father of modern Pan Africanism and the Civil Rights Movement. He stood with the Afro-Asiatic revolutionary movements and the world peace movement, was a socialist most of his life, and near its end joined the Communist Party of the United States, declaring "I believe in communism." Baldwin similarly was a socialist, a fighter for peace, and a partisan of Pan Africanism and the Afro-Asiatic revolutionary movements. Neither abandoned the struggle of the poor. This essay attempts to explain how Du Bois and Baldwin produced a body of thinking which is the basis for a scientific understanding of the U.S. social system, its current crises, and paths to revolutionary change.

W.E.B. DU BOIS: A REVOLUTION IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Out of the chaos of the social sciences of the early 20th century, Du Bois sought to create science which could explain racial oppression and colonialism; what he viewed as the principal contradiction of liberal democracy and the capitalist organization of society. His book *The Souls of Black Folk* announces a new approach to social science, where he transgresses the West's assumption that Black people were not human; *Black people were human*, he insisted, *and could be studied scientifically*. The assumption of early white sociology was that because Black folk were less than fully human, they should be studied using biology, but not social science. Du Bois thought that social science might be deployed to solve the crisis of U.S. democracy and transform society, producing a multi-racial democracy.

He boldly proclaimed, furthermore, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line"; asserting the crisis of modernity, democracy, social science, and knowledge itself was racial oppression and colonialism. The crises of American democracy he traces to slavery and the defeat of Reconstruction. Moreover, while slavery ended, Black folk were not free.

To scientifically study race in the modern world Du Bois demonstrated that a new way of knowing society was needed and that the civilizational assumptions of white social science, especially as regards race and Black people, had to be rejected. Social and human science, he believed, must engage complexity; hence rejecting the simplistic reductionism and mechanics of white and positivistic social science.

AN EPISTEMIC AND CIVILIZATIONAL RUPTURE

Beginning with his empirical studies of Black folk and race, found in, for example, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) leading to *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) and *The World and Africa* (1947), Du Bois proceeded to radically rethink the human and social geographies and social sciences. This led him to new ways of engaging the global systems of race, class exploitation, national and gender domination and oppression. He was led to rearticulate precisely what class struggle (the central logic of Marxism) meant and looked like under conditions of the U.S. racialized social relations. His rethinking emerged from the African lived world and equally from what he early on saw as the crisis of European democracy and hegemony. The color line, slavery, and colonialism were the foundations of Europe and its hegemony, but they were also signifiers of its crisis.

However, his work evidences a civilizational rupture; first defining Black folk as human, but more, defining them as Africans and Africans in America. In a review of his *Souls of Black Folk,* he said that he wrote it as an African. In the essay "The Conservation of Races" he locates Black folk as Africans and part of a civilization rooted in Africa. In *Black Reconstruction* he asserts that the enslaved were "everything African." In *Dusk of Dawn,* he asserts that African civilization was foundational to African Americans' culture. His studies of the Black church point to its African cultural foundations in its modes of organization, governance, and administration. Black religious practices evidence African origins. The music of Black folk originates in African melodies, transformed through the trans-Atlantic slave trade to Sorrow Songs; a rhythmic narrative of a disappointed people, he said.

What he began and then carried out for the rest of his life, was a decisive break with the European view of humanity. Du Bois invents a new way of scientifically studying Africans and ultimately humanity. He makes a decisive break with the idea that knowledge is essentially a European thing, and that European knowledge was universal. He insists that the study of history and modernity from a European standpoint narrows the lenses of knowing and ultimately distorts knowledge. What comes out of European philosophy and human studies was Eurocentric and prejudiced in favor of humanity's minority, white folk. In his *Autobiography* he says that while at Harvard and the University of Berlin, "I began to conceive the world as a continuing growth rather than a finished product." And he speaks of the social sciences of that time as engaged in "fruitless word twisting." As he faced "the facts of my own social situation and racial world, I determined to put science into sociology through a study of the conditions and problems of my own group." Of the white world, he says in *Dusk of Dawn* that it was "thinking wrong about race, because it did not know." It did not have either the philosophical or civilizational prerequisites to know. And what they didn't know about race and democracy, they thought wasn't consequential, at any rate. Du Bois passionately disagreed; what the white world didn't know about race would turn out to be the most consequential thing about American capitalism and modernity.

DISCOVERING THE BLACK PROLETARIAT: A REVOLUTION IN KNOWLEDGE

One of the great discoveries of revolutionary thought is of the Black Proletariat. This historically constituted and revolutionary category builds upon, yet supersedes, the Marxian notion of the class struggle. Du Bois saw the Black Proletariat as the

central revolutionary force in the anti-slavery struggle. He saw it under slavery as an enslaved proletariat. The logic of this discovery leads to Du Bois's proposing a historical logic that proceeds in threes: the Black worker, the white worker, and the white capitalist. Rather than a dialectic, as in a logic of twos, Du Bois proposes a trialectic, a logic of threes. He makes robust claims concerning the role of the Black Proletariat, including the possibility during the Reconstruction era of a dictatorship of the Black Proletariat being established in several states of the U.S. South. This dictatorship was a necessity, he reasoned, to secure a revolutionary democracy and the freedom of the former slaves.

The larger point is that the Black Proletariat is the central force in the revolutionary and democratic struggles of the United States up until now. It represents the highest levels of democratic, anti-white supremacist, and working-class consciousness. It is from a logical standpoint *the working class in its becoming*, which means that the Black Proletariat is the ground upon which the entire working class rises or falls. To achieve a revolutionary democratic consciousness, white people must reject whiteness; the working class must become more or less the Black Proletariat; hence the Black Proletariat is the entire working class in its becoming: a class for humanity. This expresses the revolutionary potential of the working class. This means the white worker, over time, becomes one with the Black worker; white workers start to think like and identify with Black workers. This is precisely the point that Baldwin makes; the first step to a revolutionary consciousness is for whiteness as an identity to be rejected.

JAMES BALDWIN, AN EVER-PRESENT REVOLUTIONARY ALTERNATIVE

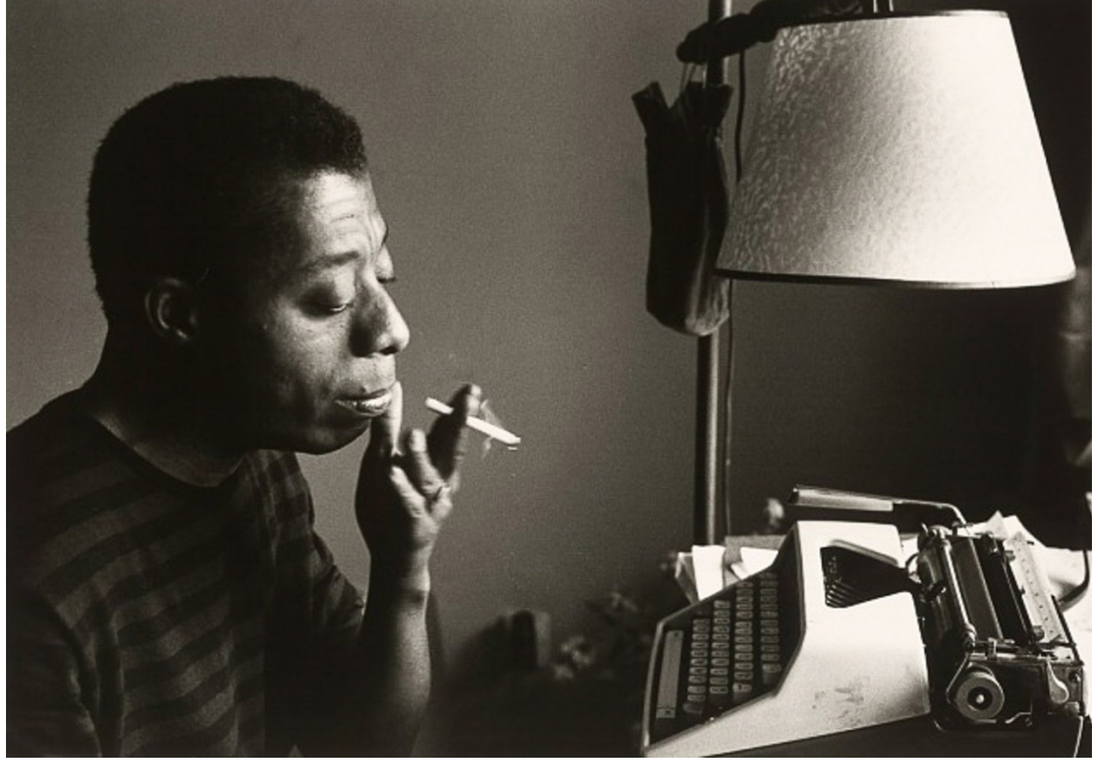
Baldwin remains the ever-present revolutionary alternative to a white world obsessed with itself and holding on to power. He viewed humanity as the focus of his intellectual and political efforts. He starts with humanity, and from that locus moves to study race and white supremacy as not only an American problem, but a human one. This gives to his writing and thinking an originality. He uncovered the workings and the machinery of racism and its predatory and pedestrian day-to-day practices and assumptions. He rigorously demonstrated how modernity engages complexity and difference through the lenses of race and white supremacy. He gave us the concepts and language to talk about and begin understanding the oppressive system of white supremacy in holistic ways. He probed its forms, its depths, its psychological and social psychological dimensions, its conscious and unconscious workings, its human devastation for Americans.

Baldwin showed that the dialectics of racism conditioned the dialectics of the social order. Economic exploitation and inequality function within the boundaries it sets, not the opposite. White supremacy was, he taught us, far more than ideology and more than a derivative of the economic system, but a system itself. He inverted the European Enlightenment and scientific orthodoxy's agreed-to assumptions and logics concerning white folk, and even what sociological reasoning asserted about race. Race was neither natural nor normal. Whiteness was an abnormal and pathological (in both psychological and societal meanings) reality, birthed by the needs of the slave trade, slavery, capitalism, and European empires. Brought into the world by slavery, capitalism, empire, and their existential necessities, white supremacy takes them over and subtly and progressively, they become it.

LANGUAGE, ART, AND A BIOGRAPHY OF HUMANITY

His *oeuvre* is a type of multi-volume biography of Black folk and humanity in the time of white supremacy. It can be thought of as a form of humanity's self-narrative, told by one of its living, striving parts. The narrative is about more than Black folk, they are the concrete forms he gives to the human, but it is about the complexities, tragedies, comedies, strivings, pathologies, and failures that humans experience as they attempt to be human, while ironically trying to hold on to non-human (perhaps pre-human) and semi-human culturally invented identities and practices. It is this conundrum; the individual confronting the past, but realizing he/she must choose what side of the future they stand upon. This is the essence of most moral choices.

It is useful in understanding Baldwin as a biographer of the human to begin from an unusual angle: the language of the oppressed. In an essay entitled "On Language, Race and the Black Writer," Baldwin says, "And for a black writer in this country to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions on which the English language operates are his enemy." This is so because white English as language assumes this is a white nation, where the logic of this assumption is that Black folk must be either erased as a linguistic and cultural force, or physically eliminated. In the essay "Down at the Cross," Baldwin observes, "For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language." And what does not exist in language has no way of attaining public acknowledgement of its existence. In this



James Baldwin by his typewriter in Istanbul, 1966. Photo by Sedat Pakay—Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, © Sedat Pakay.

very real sense, American society has not and till this day does not recognize the realities of Black life. This in many ways explains the emergence of a Black Social System; a system of language, beliefs, institutions, habits, and ways of life, which has little to do with the standards by which white people live. This system, among other things, validates Black people's sense of their situation, which is ignored by the white world.

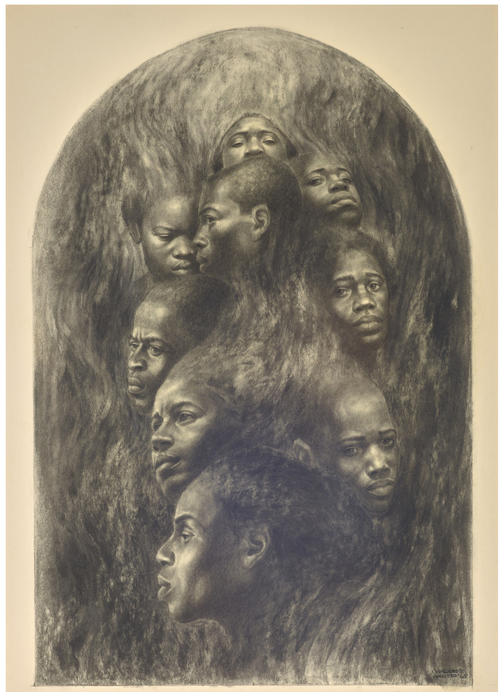
What Baldwin calls Black English is a language of resistance and it functions as such for Black folk. Baldwin, in his examinations of Black language, starts not with grammar, vocabulary, and syntax, but the role and functions of all languages. Language functions as the way of social communication, but significantly as narrating a people's existence. Black English does precisely that. It came into existence out of brutal necessity. Black English functions like every language, to assert the humanity of the group which speaks it and to prevent that group being erased from history. It establishes that the said group is prepared to and does resist the oppressors and their language. Black English, therefore, is the preeminent language of resistance in America. It expresses a worldview, a people's narrative, and gives rise to literature and music. Without it, he thought, there would be but one language, the English of white supremacy and whiteness.

Black English is hence the democratic alternative to white English and its assumptions. Baldwin concludes, "And after all, finally, in a country with standards so untrustworthy, a country that makes heroes of so many criminal mediocrities, a country unable to face why so many of the nonwhite are in prison, or on the needle (on heroine, or other drugs — A.M.), or standing, futureless, in the streets—it may very well be that both the child, and his elder, have concluded that they have nothing whatever to learn from the people of a country that has managed to learn so little."

In its wider sense Black English is the language of the Black Proletariat; it is, therefore, the language of the most revolutionary democratic force in the nation. All that emerges from the assumptions of Black English serves the interests of revolutionary resistance. It is a language of the future; it is thus generative and futuristic.

THE WHITE SUPREMACIST SOCIAL SYSTEM AND THE WHITE CIVILIZATIONAL DISPOSITION

Baldwin and Du Bois assumed the U.S. social system was not as described by liberal and radical theory. Baldwin and Du Bois, rather, saw it as what can be defined as a white supremacist social system. The most foundational relationships



Charles White, J'Accuse #2, 1965. Primas Family Collection. © Photo: Chad Redmon.

in U.S. society are, therefore, race relationships. These relationships are determinative of class, gender, ethnic, and other social relationships. Yet most consequentially, power at all levels of society is determined by white supremacy. It is the overarching system; it is the unifying system in American society; without it, capitalist society falls apart.

The white supremacist social system emerges after the defeat of Reconstruction (1877) and its democratic possibilities. It consolidated a new racial order, which undergirded the new capitalist order. Its legal justification is the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, establishing whiteness as constitutionally protected; thus, making Black rights expendable and secondary to the protection of whiteness and white privilege. The habits and social norms that proceed from this are the ground of the modern U.S. social system. Establishing whiteness as constitutionally protected meant that whiteness is protected by the state and its major institutions. The state is not only a defender of white supremacy but is itself white supremacist. The standards through which the economy, law, religion, education, language, art, literature, and music, among other things, operate are within the framework of the overall white supremacist system. In important ways the social system that arose upon the heels of the defeat of Reconstruction and the *Plessy* decision modernized white supremacy and white civilization, in the era of imperialism, war, and economic crises. It is being further modernized as the Democratic Party assumes the mantle of the vanguard of the defense of the white supremacist social system, as it both "condemns" white supremacy and claims to be the party of Black freedom and inheritors of the legacy of its leaders. The white supremacist system says to white people that in return for the state's protection of whiteness, white folk are obligated to defend whiteness in their "self-defense"; this is called democracy.

The book *The New Jim Crow*, which analyzes the imprisonment of Black men, shows evidence that the Black Proletariat is the main target of white supremacy, and that the legal system is an arm of the white supremacist social system. *American Apartheid* studies housing segregation and discrimination; it shows extreme segregation among Black folk; separating them from jobs, health care, educational opportunities, and equal housing. Other metrics of social status, such as health and education, show Black folk less healthy and less educated than most Americans. However, the enduring status of Black folk, in fact over 20 generations, points to the existence of this overarching and determinative white supremacist social system. But the evidence regarding Black folk is indicative of what the social system is. What is shown is that the most significant way to understand American society is to understand it in white supremacist systemic terms.

Du Bois's and Baldwin's bodies of work detail in all its dimensions a social system that produces Black oppression. They both studied the capacity of Black people for transformative action to change this system. For both, therefore, the Black struggle was a struggle for freedom and to topple this social system.

What we learn from their work is that theories of revolutionary and democratic change must begin with understanding the white supremacist social system. The revolutionary, democratic, and emancipatory struggles must commit to the undoing of this system as the principal revolutionary task. And thus, this task highlights the centrality of Black freedom to democracy, as Baldwin insisted it is through this door (Black freedom) that all democratic and revolutionary forces must go.

THE BLACK SOCIAL SYSTEM

Black folk have created an alternative to the white supremacist social system, a system of resistance; a Black Social System. Baldwin and Du Bois devoted tremendous intellectual effort to explaining this system; this world within a world, or this nation within a nation, to use Du Bois's language. It encompasses all the institutions of Black life, from churches, other religious institutions, art and music, literature, colleges and universities, families and extended social networks, fraternal and sorority organizations, community organizations of varied types, political parties, cultural institutions, and more. This complex set of Black institutions, networks, and organizations makes up Black life. All of this is the social form of Black resistance and resilience; Black existence, in many ways, exists within the Black social system. All of this gives a distinct, and in fact, very apparent difference to Black folk. Du Bois and Baldwin write and think from within the Black social system; from within the Veil, to use Du Bois's language.

COUNTER-REVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION: NOW IS THE TIME

Du Bois's and Baldwin's thinking, as I've sought to show, are complementary and produce the groundwork for theorizing capable of explaining our current political and ideological crises, and possible paths forward. Wars are occurring in many parts of the world. The U.S. empire is in decline, poverty increases, and for the majority of U.S. people, life is a dark and tragic landscape. Having recentered revolutionary theory, Du Bois and Baldwin offer theory which ascends to the concrete realities of the U.S. and the specificities of this nation, especially at this moment of crisis. Accounting for this, the trajectory which they envisioned was a revolutionary democratic struggle; a struggle that, as Baldwin put it, seeks to achieve our country and make America the last white nation. This means that all struggles for peace, democracy, and progress must be connected to dismantling the white supremacist social system as the obligatory struggle to achieve conditions for advancing the people and nation to the next stage of struggle which leads to a completely new social, political, and economic system. In the throes of these struggles, Du Bois and Baldwin viewed the Black Proletariat as the key revolutionary force. United fronts for revolutionary democracy and emancipation must be built upon this recognition.

In the last part of his life, Baldwin said many times the white man's party was over; world humanity had moved beyond the West. He also asked, What would be the price of the ticket to create a new world? This question remains. The American people, in unity with world humanity, must ultimately answer this question.

In *The Year of James Baldwin: God's Revolutionary Voice*, the Saturday Free School has gained experience and knowledge about people's thinking. We have discovered that Baldwin captures their thinking and strivings; he provides ideas and language to concretely guide their action. We are on the cusp of major struggles for a new democracy and world peace; the people can decide the outcome and the future. We are, moreover, in a time when, as Martin Luther King Jr. and Baldwin taught us, the moral imperative is the revolutionary imperative.

The poor and working people are no longer satisfied to sit back and wait upon ruling elites. So much depends on the ideological and moral clarity of the people. The Year of Baldwin is a contribution to that clarity.

ALFIE POLLITT, MASTER OF THE PHILLY SOUND

INTERVIEW BY MICHELLE LYU, KATHIE JIANG,
AND ANTHONY MONTEIRO

On two Sundays in late summer and early fall, we interviewed Alfie Pollitt at the North Philadelphia home of Anthony Monteiro. We found Alfie to be not only generous, but warm and kind, qualities often associated with great artists. We spent close to six hours exploring the many layers of Black music and how it is manifested through the Philadelphia Sound.

The Saturday Free School had previously interviewed Alfie; however, we felt that this moment in history demanded we return to him. We embarked upon this interview with our own philosophical and ideological assumptions. First, this is the Year of James Arthur Baldwin's centenary. Baldwin's ideas of art as an act of love and revolution in the Black struggle informed his view that going forward, America must become the "last white nation." Second, more than anything, we are informed by a fierce urgency of now, to prevent world war and to end the genocide against the Palestinian women and children. Thirdly, we believe that Alfie lives a principled life: he is therefore an exemplar for artists.

He plays in churches, at banquets and celebrations, public parks and community events: continuously becoming more intertwined with the lives of the people of Philadelphia. He shares in their daily joys and suffering, so that he may know them better and heighten the quality of the lives they lead. His music is clear and resonant, through which one meets the truth of what James Baldwin writes, *"Where the poet can sing, the people can live."*

Alfie developed within what is in effect a Black civilizational tradition. This tradition has allowed the American people the possibility of relinquishing whiteness. In essence, this tradition grounds what we would like to call the Black Proletarian Imaginary: a futuristic consciousness.

Alfie was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania in 1943. His life was intertwined with the genesis and maturing of the Black freedom movement and the great musical revolution that emerged from it. This was a period of struggle and upheaval in the country. The Civil Rights Movement, America's Third Revolution, transformed the nation. Philadelphia, and North Philadelphia in particular, produced a post-WWII generation of talented singers, dancers, and musicians: Doo Wop, Bebop, Hard Bop, Free Jazz, and Rhythm & Blues were a cradle nurturing new sounds. This aesthetic matured from the late 1940s into the 1970s; ultimately becoming known as The Sound of Philadelphia.

The Philly Sound defines love as a concrete task and responsibility, a moral choice that struggles against the white supremacist social system and furnishes spiritual sustenance for a struggling people. Opposing the governing elite's agenda of war, poverty and racism, the singers, arrangers, lyricists, and performers exuded an unmistakable moral uprightness and grounding in the Black masses from which they emerged. Love, peace and humanity are its guiding principles.

Today, in the Black music tradition, Jazz is assumed to be more advanced than Rhythm & Blues because it is more abstract and favored by sophisticated audiences. Moreover, the most modern expressions of Jazz are assumed to be avant-garde because they seem more complex and produce less familiar sounds. However modernism should not be conflated with abstraction. Each genre in the post-WWII era is part of a single garment of musical creativity. Each manifests the people, The Black Proletariat, from which it comes.

No people answered the cry for modern thought more fully than African Americans. As a social group they possess the most complete understanding of what W.E.B. Du Bois called "the problem of the twentieth century," the color line. This constant struggle of Black folk against white supremacy, capitalism, and for the unfulfilled goal of freedom, produced a rich spiritual and social tapestry from which original, highly conscious, and distinctly modern music sprang.

Alfie possesses an intimate understanding of the Black Proletariat, and his music acknowledges their interior lives and the deep suffering that generations of his people have endured in this country. Colored People's Modernity, struggling to be born from the ruins of white modernity, in many respects is the task the Sound of Philadelphia seeks to achieve. A task of world historic and revolutionary significance which can only be achieved to the degree that the artist, and in particular the musician, links themselves to the aspirations of the oppressed.

Alfie playing at Mt. Zion A.M.E. Church in Chester County, PA for a dedication of the church's restored stained glass windows and celebration of their 175th church anniversary, 2024. Photographs by Michelle Lyu.

ALFIE POLLITT WORDS ON WORDS

I want to raise this question of how to sustain, you know. Because I think people today, a lot of them have this belief that you have to compromise. You compromise here and there, it's okay, this thing is transactional, it's okay if I sell out a little bit. And I think what the argument we're trying to make is that well the artist cannot compromise. And the artist must take a side. And the only contribution a true artist can make is for freedom and that means something concrete.

I'm just fortunate to be able to do what little I be doing, you know, and to be able to do that.

Man I found out stuff, I seen this interview with Eric Dolphy's mother and father a few days ago you know. And they wasn't like—you know, some parents—"I don't know with my son, he went off. What is he doing, what is that?" They was like, understanding, and the interview person asked, "Well did he ever, how did he succeed or make it?" He said, "Well he ain't really make it."

(Laughs) His father said that?

Yeah, "He ain't really make it." I mean, he didn't really make no money doing this, you know what I mean. He went to New York, people didn't want to play with him. In the Western classical music community he was sought after—flute stuff, and bass clarinet, and stuff like that you know.

I saw him one time, it was a big thing. Whatchamacallit. It was on national TV. It was Oliver Nelson who was conducting it, and it was Hank Jones, Elvin's brother on piano. Art Davis on bass. And Eric was on flute and bass clarinet. It was a big, you know, big, big thing. Hollywood, you know, big money into it. It was top class. But they were sought out because of what they could do. Respected that way, but you know, maybe situations like that may be far and few between. To get a gig like that. As opposed to playing for the door—money comes in the door at a club or coffee house or something, you know.

I guess, the drive. The drive. I'm driven to want to play.

I feel like a fish out of water if I don't sit down at the keyboard and play at least something—try to, you know, each day.

Some people, man, they just think magically, they just want to just play, you know what I mean. Play masterfully. Because they listened to somebody else and then they play it and then their friends tell them, "Oh, you're sensational!" And miss some steps in between, as far as their growth and development, what it takes.

Where do you like to play these days? What are the gigs?

Whoever would hire me. (Laughs) Not whoever.

No, but you're selective.

Ideally, where people appreciate the music and will listen to it and you know, grow from it. Whether it be straight ahead, or R&B. I don't gravitate towards you know like, night clubs. Unless, you know, somebody out there got a night club and appreciates the music and presents the music as it is: art. And so people come in with the mindset that they're going to receive art you know, which is reciprocal, give and take, from the listener and the performer. I would say.

Your knowledge, your experience. For people that don't know; but she said like, here's Alfie. He done play with Russell, he done play with Teddy, he done play with this, the other, then he know the whole Jazz thing here.

Well I just feel that this whole tradition is being cheapened. Your tradition. It's why I'm thinking about this interview so much, and how important it is and how important your life is. Yeah I mean you already know how I feel about what you've given, but you know I've watched it be degraded, and I do feel some type of way about it. And I think the record is going to have to be set straight. And I think there's a battle. I think there's a fierce battle about what this music is and who it belongs to. And we're trying to make that clear, that it doesn't belong with the white world, you know. It's been made by men like you.

As per like ownership. Ownership. Possession. Ownership.

Well, you call it healing music, that world calls it entertainment, you know.

Yeah, like entertainment—I do R&B, that's like entertainment, we do that. That's more like entertainment to me. You know, 'cause people come for entertainment, to reminisce about romance and times they had back in the day and you know, that kind of thing. Not as a negative. But I mean it's more so, when we play—you come out to Ardmore, you see that? People come out to get fed. And like you said about the quantum physics piece, remember you said that a long time ago? And I thought about it, I said, I take myself away from that—that ain't me. I participate. I'm grateful to be part of stuff come through me, that touches people.

I feel like this music is for all people, including white people. I feel like that's part of what you're saying.

Oh, of course.

But not in that way you know, not on those terms.

Because if you look at the whole planet, everybody is a so-called African. Everybody on the planet. Everybody.

PHILADELPHIA FREE JAZZ / AVANT-GARDE

Could I ask you about Giuseppi Logan and Khan Jamal? First Giuseppi Logan, because you mentioned avant-garde.

I could talk about both of them.

And who was the reed player, who was with Khan Jamal…

Byard?

Byard. Yeah, him too.

Okay. Well, Giuseppi. I met Giuseppi before I met Byard, Khan and all of them. I met him through hanging out with Nate Murray, down Lancaster Ave, I think it was at a place called the Bar Nun on Wyalusing Avenue and 56th. And they used to have a jam session. And this sax player named Jimmy Savage, was an alto player, he was really good; and he would host the session. And it would be a cutting session, you know, people would try to out play other people. So he was like the star alto player and that was his kingdom, that bar, right. So, Giuseppi came in town from Norfolk.

I thought he was from Philly.*

No. Norfolk. He came here, he had a big family, had his family with him. I think he got busted for possession or something. So he had to stay here for a minute.

And he came to this session, and he sat in. And you know, Jimmy, the guy, leader of the clan, you know—"Man, what's going on"—Giuseppi blew him off the stage. So, I mean. 'Cause Giuseppi played about nine different horns. Yeah. So Giuseppi heard me play—

*Giuseppi Logan was originally born in Philadelphia, but moved to Norfolk when he was young.

he liked my playing. So he said, while he's in town, he had to wait to go to court, and he had some free time during the day.

And I was living at home in Bryn Mawr then, with my parents, my brother and sister. So he would come on out to Bryn Mawr and we went to my godmother's. And my godmother was my piano teacher. She lived around the corner from us. And you know, with her, I studied a little Mozart, you know, stuff like that. We're playing teas, recitals and stuff. And you know, it was like we got put on the spot—"Little Alfred is gonna play for us."

But she was a real wide open person. Because I studied with her, and I was learning all these different pieces, you know out of them books. So she noticed that I was becoming a teenager. I was a teenager and my interests were, you know, I had other interests. She said, "Well, bring in something that you wanna, you know, that you've been listening to and we'll see what we can do." So I brought her in this book, it's a book that had a picture of Thelonius Monk and a little red wagon sitting on the album cover. So we tried to figure out *Brilliant Corners*, and "Ba-Lue Bolivar Ba-Lues-Are," a song from the *Brilliant Corners* album.

And she never like, judged me or said, "Oh no, no, we don't do that here." So, I took a chance when I met Giuseppi, you know, because my godmother had a nice piano. A baby grand piano. And you know, during the day, she was home weekdays, so I asked her if Giuseppi, this guy I met, could come over and practice. She said yeah. So we was over there, so we was playing *out*. So to speak. And she never put us out of the house, or called the police on us, none of that—reprimanded us. She, you know, let us do our thing, you know, like the next day we'd come back.

But Giuseppi told me that he liked Eric Dolphy. Because he said Eric is *worse* than Coltrane. That was his words.

Better than Coltrane.

He say worse.

Worse.

Yeah, I guess more out. He liked Trane, but liked Eric more so.

Wow.

Okay so, that was in the early to mid '60s. I met Byard—

Could I just ask you one more question about Giuseppi? Giuseppi went cold blooded avant-garde.

Pretty much, yeah.

Then he disappeared suddenly. Went over to New York and disappeared. What happened to him?

Well 1966, I was working in Montreal at a so-called jazz club up there. And then I came home and while I was home, I went to New York to hang out with Giuseppi. He was living on the Lower East Side, and he knew Rashied Ali. Remember I told you the bridge we walked over, Manhattan Bridge? We walked across that bridge over to Rashied's studio he had at that time. And we did a jam session one afternoon and Rashied recorded it, and I don't know where that, if it exists or anything.

But Giuseppi, he was signed to ESP label, you know. And I guess he was a threat some kind of way, and so to kind of take him down, people found out his weakness.

What was his weakness?

His weakness was these women.

Women.

Caucasian women. And they got close to him—according to what I heard, and put something in his food and just diminished his wind power as far as the playing sax and everything. And then eventually I don't know what happened 'cause I didn't keep in touch with him. I was looking on YouTube and I saw this thing about "rediscovered Giuseppi Logan" in the Village, St. Christopher's Square or something like that. And this guy that rediscovered him—wait a minute, did I see you at the concert?

Here. Yeah, here, when he was down in Philly.

No. At the Art Alliance. My brother was doing that. 'Cause we were down there, 'cause he knew my brother too.

But Giuseppi was homeless over in New York for years, right?

According to what they say. He didn't have a horn or nothing.

These white young guys, they found him. They brought him back over here, but he would start playing and then he'd lose himself, or they had to have somebody with him.

When he was at that show, he could only play but for so long—endurance; and then he would run out of gas.

I thought it was a mental thing.

No no, he didn't have the wind power. Didn't have the qi, didn't have the life force, the breath, to be able to. According to my observations. And my brother, he felt the same way.

'Cause my brother used to live in New York. He went to art school up at Art Students League in Manhattan. He was up there with, I'm talking about Stanley Whitney, painter. Another painter, James Phillips. They're all from Bryn Mawr; they were all contemporaries with my brother. And they were under my mother. My mother was an artist, a painter. And my best friend Jervis Holley, he was like my age but he was a great painter, so he mentored them and my mother mentored Phillips, Stanley Whitney, and my brother Harry Pollitt. And I introduced Phillips to Rittenhouse Square.

Oh, boy (laughs).

The street. The way, how to survive on the street, off the fat of the land so to speak. (Laughs) And you know, introduced me to so-called jazz. So, I mean if you check out some of these interviews with Stanley Whitney, he says he don't paint unless he got music playing. Phillips—the same way. So anyway, Phillips and Stanley, my brother, and I, we crashed where we could, in that early life as young bohemians so to speak.

So they knew Pharoah Sanders and Rashied Ali and different people. Elvin. They seen Trane. They was younger than me, but they were part of the wave of some of the people who were around to see Trane and them. So a lot of people nowadays man, never seen Trane. And that was like, it was like, you know. He would give sermons. It was, like Alan Nelson and myself, we were part of the Coltrane, McCoy, Elvin—disciples.

We were going places; we was underage and we'd go to Pep's and Showboat. And the guys like Freddie Freeloader—Miles named a song after him, *Kind of Blue* album—was a bartender. And he would let us come in and drink fruit punch and sodas and see our heroes, you know. So we were blessed to be able to sit at the feet of these folk.

I saw Sun Ra one time. First time I seen him, he came in Pep's as a side man.

With who?

Walt Dickerson, vibraphone player. It was him. I think, might have been Marshall Allen, and I think Ike Quebec or somebody. Pat Patrick. They were sidemen for Walt on this gig, you know. But yeah, this music was an influence. Was a great influence on my life, you know what I mean.

You remember the brother who used to play vibes from down South Philly?

Bill Lewis.

Bill Lewis. Very avant-garde, very futuristic—

Futuristic thinking cat. Yeah, Bill gave me a band one time. Gave me a tenor player, trumpet player, bass player, and a drummer. But I couldn't hold it together 'cause I was out there, during that time. Up at Lee Cultural Center, 44th and Haverford, gave me a band.

So what about Khan Jamal and them?

So, I met Byard in '66 at a jam session up at Pleasant Playground, at Boyer and Pleasant, up in Mount Airy section called Dogtown. They all lived around that way, and Byard was like—

That's where Archie Shepp is from.

No no, Shepp is from the Brickyard.

Brickyard, I'm sorry. Forgive me.

Brickyard, Wister Street and all around there.

So Byard, you know. At that time, Byard was home from school, Berklee College of Music. He's one of the first cats from Philly who went up there, you know, way back. So he was out, and I just loved his sound. Had the Trane stuff, and Eric, and different things. So through him I met his boys—Khan Jamal. I met Monnette Sudler, Bill Meek, piano player. The whole Germantown crew, you know. And I worked with Khan. I worked with Byard and Khan together.

And they was definitely out.

Yeah.

Bill Lewis.

On purpose. Mhm.

On purpose, yeah. Oh yeah.

And the band we had with Byard was like, we had three drummers.

Wow.

Caucasian guy named Bobby Kapp. Guy a little older than us named J. R. Mitchell. And Eric Grávátt who was younger than us. Eric who worked with McCoy Tyner, Weather Report.

Really.

Mhm. Eric was one of the Byard's mentees, you know.

So we had three drummers. Jerome Hunter on bass, Byard on sax.

Khan on vibes.

Khan on vibes. Monnette Sudler, guitar.

Woah. Shit.

And then other horn players would come and play with us; a guy named Liptus Saturn. He was a cat that came out of this school like when Trane, when *Ascension*, when that was released. It was horn players who were not really, didn't study saxophone but they heard Trane, Archie Shepp and Ornette and them.

They heard the aspect of honking and screaming on the horns. So they went and got into that, and they went out and they even got paid for that; they'd never really studied the music. Whereas Ornette, Trane, and them were like—music systems. Studied all that kind of stuff. .

The reason I ask about them, Giuseppi and Khan and all of them. It's almost like they're forgotten figures in the Philadelphia avant-garde.

Mhm.

Bill Lewis. And these are very, very—

'Cause Bill Lewis started the Long March—

That's right.

—Jazz Society, whatever it was called. In fact I was on a committee with, it was Bill Lewis. Ron Everett, trumpet player, sang with the Castells singing group and he was also a trumpet player, jazz, wrote songs, wrote plays. And Byard, and, what's my man's name—Gino, from Gino's Empty Foxhole. Gino Barnhart, who I met through Byard. His church had that space where the Empty Foxhole took place, you know, let them use that space. But yeah, we was on the Long March committee together, you know, the advisory committee or whatever. Bill Lewis, Byard, Ron Everett.

I wanted to ask you to say a bit more about Giuseppi Logan's contribution to this music.

He was mistreated by the system. He was a great talent. And I think some of that was envy and jealousy, people that took him down. In New York, in the Village, the East Village.

And then when he came back and then we went in to see him perform, he hardly had any breath

power, wind power. And it seemed like the guy that was the leader of the band that was kind of looking out for him, was kind of like. It seemed like, was kind of pimping him, you know what I mean. Like Barnum—"Here's my side show, here's my Elephant Man," or whatever. Okay, after the show was over—"Put him back in his cage."

But Giuseppi, did he play with Albert Ayler and them?

Well, not Albert Ayler. They had different—Marion Brown, Albert Ayler, John Tchicai, Prince Lasha. All these different people had their own expression. He was part of that wave, you know; that group of folk, that expression.

Even there was a guy, remember this guy—what was his name? He was a so-called avant-garde alto player. Joe Harriott from England. He was part of it, but he was in England doing similar type music, back in the '60s.

So Giuseppi was in that East Village group.

Yeah.

Marion Brown.

Sun Ra. Sun Ra, they was all living down there. Pharaoh, Rashied Ali, Dewey Redman. Bunch of people. A guy named Marzette [Watts], have you heard of Marzette?

Marzette was a tenor player, he was part of the Village Loft scene. And he would—my friend James Philipps, the painter, him and Stanley Whitney and them, they was in the Village during this time back in the '60s, right, so they were around seeing these different people, different characters. So like Marzette was a guy, he would wear a cook's uniform, like a cook's hat, and play. Just like—what's the guy's name? The guy that played with the—

Used to be with the Art Ensemble.

Art Ensemble.

The trumpeter.

With the lab coat on.

Yeah, like the surgical thing. Doctor shit.

Not unlike Flava Flav with the clock. Identify with your own brand, part of they brand.

You would call him avant-garde?

I guess that's the term people use, but you know, "so-called." I say so-called, about all that stuff.

I wanted to ask you about Odean Pope.

Well he's a good friend of John Coltrane. And you know, they played together, practiced together from what I understand. From when Trane was living here.

Odean practiced with Coltrane?

From what I understand, yeah. He used to be at the Coltrane House, when Trane was living there, from what I understand. Him. John Glenn, he was a tenor player, one of Trane's contemporaries. And he from Philly. But he had kind of like a Southern accent, maybe he was not originally from Philly, but I knew him from Philly, West Philly.

But he supposedly influenced Trane to do multiphonics, playing more than one note at the same time.

Who was this, now?

John Glenn. And I was blessed to play with John. I played with, you know, a lot of people in the scene here back in the '60s. John was one of them. He was a great tenor player, and he sounds similar to Trane.

PHILADELPHIA RHYTHM & BLUES

I want to follow up on something from the first interview. And it was when you talked about your discovery of R&B because my understanding from the first interview was that at first there was a certain hesitation you felt toward the music, because you said that it might be like sellout music.

Oh, let's go back before that though. There was a guy that lived in my neighborhood, he lived in Haverford. He played the piano by ear, and he stomped on the floor. And he amazed me, you know what I mean, I wanted to be able to do that. He couldn't read music. And we were playing like Fats Domino and Little Richard, that kind of music, you know what I mean. And then sometime after that I was singing doo wop. So I was doing—you know, things shifted, you know what I mean.

Later on, in the so-called staunch jazz—"I ain't going to do the other kind of music" type thing, vibe, and then things shifted. Because as I was saying, because Billy Paul and Norman Connors and us, we was like, "We ain't selling out, we ain't playing that." Then I started hearing them with hit records you know, and said there got to be something to that, because if they buy into it, there's got to be—let me investigate. And I'm glad I did.

Alfie, during our interview. Philadelphia 2024.

And then I saw, those are great people. You look at Bobby Martin, the arranger. You look at Thom Bell, the arranger. These people, the stuff they did, like world-class. I mean, you know, like Beethoven and all them guys, you know what I mean, type level and beyond. Put their own spin, their own unique originality with it.

And then people be telling me I got my own sound, so I try to work on that, I just accept that and try to be myself. When I grow up, I'm gonna get some long pants though (laughs).

(Laughs) Yeah. So would you say you followed their lead to an extent, Norman Connors and Billy Paul, into R&B?

Yeah. Mhm.

Not directly, because they were living in Hollywood and other places, and New York. And I'm in Philly. And I'm in the Nation [of Islam]. On the day to day I'm selling *Muhammad Speaks*, fish, all that kind of stuff. Trying to be married at the same time. And trying to not get all my bills turned off, you know. (Laughs) You know. And people saying, "Why are you with that Muhammad guy?"

(Laughs)

"And then I got started loving the Sound of Philadelphia. So it was like part of my DNA..."

You know (laughs). All kind of stuff.

And then years later, when I grew locs; before that, my brother and I, we were some of the first guys who had afros on the Main Line, of our generation. And these women would say, "Boy, you better not fall asleep, I'mma cut that hair off. Don't fall asleep around me, you need to cut that mess off your head boy."

(Laughs)

Right? You probably experienced something similar.

I don't know about that, 'cause I'm from the hood, man. You from the suburbs.

Well, the hood? Ohh, oh, man. You gotta throw that in there. See.

(Laughs)

Come on, man. Come on, Tony. Come on, man. Can't you relate? Can't you relate!

(Laughing) No, I can't!

Alright, it's okay. 'Scuse me, you got the floor, go ahead.

(Laughs)

Wait a minute, tacit, tacit, tacit. You got the floor, go ahead. Take it away. (Laughs)

Well I'm trying to understand, or just hear a little bit more about—

I followed them from a distance. Not directly, went to him—"Why are you playing" or, you know. Yeah, but I studied, you know, some of the music and tried to emulate on my own without any, really, somebody directing me. Just using my ear and trying to, you know, that kind of thing.

I'm trying to understand what the birth of this Philly R&B sound and movement looked like.

What it looked like?

Like how it began.

People playing in taprooms and bars and stuff. Cabarets. Like, from what I been told. Like Kenny Gamble and the Romeos, okay. The band Kenny

and them had before Philly International stuff. They would play in cabarets.

Tell them what a cabaret is.

A cabaret is a party. People go to like, rent a dance hall, or skate rink or something, and have dance in there. And people bring their food and liquor and stuff, and they party. And at that time they would dance and party to the band that's playing for the event. And the band, they knew Chico Booth, King James, Kenny Gamble and the Romeos; three examples of groups that they listened to. They had their pulse on what was on the radio and what's moving people. So they learned that stuff. So people had a good time, without a DJ back then, you know what I mean.

So when Kenny and them started recording, him and Huff and them, they were going to the studio and they'd take some musicians in. And they might have an idea for a song, just like a line or something. And actually, the musicians really create the song. Because the musicians did what breaks Motown, breaks with what was popular then and stuff. And so it's combination of stuff that then Gamble and Huff would record that and go back, write the song. And according to what I heard these guys never got compensated for—they really helped create, collaborated on these songs.

Could I just ask—so Kenny Gamble and the Romeos. Kenny Gamble had a group, and it was the Romeos.

Right.

And a cabaret is like, you see—Blue Horizon. You know what a Blue Horizon is. People would rent it and then you could come there, bring your own whiskey, your own beer.

Food.

Food, that's right. And party.

Indoor party.

Indoor party. So Kenny Gamble and them was in that circuit, that cabaret circuit.

Yeah, cabarets like the Imperial Ballroom. On 60th Street. The Olympia Ballroom, what was that 52nd and Baltimore. Cosmopolitan.

So you saying that the musicians, you know would make the music. But then the songwriters, let's say Kenny and them, would take credit for it.

Take credit. And financially benefit. Probably based on the model that they had, and what they had to go through. I mean for songwriters, you know. People like the Cameo Parkway label, you know, the big guys—"We're giving you a break. We're going to record your song." And so maybe the artists think it's a great chance that somebody is giving them.

We're just coming off such a beautiful performance yesterday. And knowing that you also perform at the Ardmore retirement home. I'm curious, why do you play where you play? Or where do you not play, you know, that sort of thing. I think a lot of young people need to hear, or a lot of people need to hear—

Yes, so the tradition can be more intact. Win-win situation. Hopefully, and be able to maintain that.

Say a little bit more about why you do Jazz and **R&B.**

Well, the R&B. See, I was blessed to be around Philly International Records, Sigma Sound Studios, and be around producers and arrangers and songwriters and record promoters and radio people, DJ's. And having worked with—the first gig I did in really dedicated R&B Philadelphia Sound stuff was in '74 with Major Harris.

So how that happened was, I had been active in the Nation of Islam, which I was at that time. And you know, basically selling papers, and I stopped playing music because I was doing 300 papers a week before I got my X. And I was blessed to maintain it from '69 to about '75, more or less.

So, abiding by what my understanding of some of what Elijah Muhammad's teachings were about: music and sports and sporting players; it's a carry over from the plantation system, where a slave owner would have his buck Negro guy fight against another one's. And they'd fight to the death. And bet money on them, and you know—hey, somebody lose their life, no big deal, next. That kind of thing. So that's what's called "sport and play."

And then like trickle down to this day and time, most of the money that Black people make is like as a musician, you know, the big money, and athletics. So it's called "sport and play," so it was frowned upon, even though Muhammad Ali, he was—I wouldn't have had him stop fighting, if I were to have a kind of influence on the time.

So we were told that "sport and play," it's uncivilized. And it said that the civilized person would pat their foot to music inside their shoe where nobody could see him, you know what I mean. And like "no emotion" that kind of thing. But one of my lieutenants, who has, he made transition, Lieutenant Thomas 14X—he said "Look, brother, you got a gift." And plus he promoted me, as far as, you know, he'd

tell people, "Yeah this brother Alfie here, you know, selling his papers, y'all need to be like him." But he had a revelation, and said. He said, "You got a gift. Don't get so spooky with all these rules and stuff, and do that music."

And he started something called the "Night Out with the FOI" which was Brothers who were former—came into the Nation as musicians and what have you. Who became, you know, a minister or became a secretary—gave up music totally. Worked in the restaurant, or this and that, and just had a job selling papers, making money off of papers and products from the Nation. So Brothers came back to their instruments, so he started that, and that's how I got back into it.

And then, also I started hearing Norman Connors and Billy Paul having records coming out that were crossing over. Because see, back in the day, Norman and Billy Paul and all of us, we lived together down at a studio, 1430 South Penn Square. Across, something across—real estate people. It was a studio loft building: artists, painters, second story men.

(Laughs)

Shoplifters, panhandlers. A very eclectic group of folk. We all dwelled there. Some people were official residents, and some people crashed there, you know what I mean?

Where was this at now?

1430 South Penn Square. Right across from the Catto statue, just about.

Oh, y'all was down there. Right across from City Hall.

Yeah, no longer exists, that building. It was a studio loft building, maybe three or four stories. Before, remember they had that fire, people got killed in some kind of a high rise. That's no longer there but there's something else there now. It was right there. But we all—Richard Watson, Charlie Pridgen, all these different painters, and Walt[er] Edmonds, and Joe Bailey, he was a sculptor, and James Gadson. And all these folks.

Leo [Gadson]'s brother.

Yeah, Leo's brother, one of his brothers. So, we were avid, and Norman Connors and Billy Paul—Norman would practice every day, all day long, you know what I mean; on drums, he was like one of the best drummers to me when he left Philly to go to New York. But we were anti so-called sellout, where we call it, you know, playing R&B music. But what happened was, Norman and I, we were in New York together. Norman, Linda Sharrock—Linda Chambers—we moved to New York. A guy named Ron Myers, he says Uncle Paul Myers had the Aqua Lounge, the jazz club in West Philly. So Ron, he had what we called an old bomb type car. And we was going in New York, and he was trying to race a hot rod and blew a gasket. So we wound up in Hightstown, New Jersey, stranded. So we went to a Travelers Aid and we got tickets to go to New York, Greyhound, we got up there. So we was there like refugees. So we go there, we're just hanging. Norman and Linda stayed, I came back to Philly. You know.

So we lived for the music. Although we danced. We partied hardy. Robert Kenyatta, Gerald Roberts, and Norman and us, we all did that stuff. We met Gerald yesterday.

Yeah, he was telling me about the place across from City Hall.

1430 South Penn Square; Jackson and Cross was the realtor. And in fact, it was an experiment, looking back on it. The *audacity* of these Black cats being in there, having integrated stuff going on, parties. And right under the nose of Rizzo at City Hall—

(Laughs) Yeah. (Laughs)

Right across the street. We got raided so many times, you know, but the raids, they backfired on them, because they would come through and the person they try to get, got tipped off, so they wouldn't be there, you know, when the raid went down.

We used to go to a place called the Paradise Lounge, which was 16th and Fitzwater.

Oh yeah. I heard Billy Paul in there.

Billy Paul, right. Norman Connors, Yusef Rahman, the Visitors, a lot of people used to play there on Tuesday nights. It was like a Black Arts Movement venue during that time. So we just played straight ahead. And then, so like, years later I heard Billy Paul and Norman Connors had records out of his hits, on R&B.

So I started saying, there must be something to this, that they would do this. So I listened to Blue Magic's first album, and the *Mighty Love* album. Studied stuff. Learned about Sigma Sound Studios, some of the names of people at MFSB, the writers Gamble and Huff and all this. Sigma Sounds was after I self-taught myself a little medley and stuff, went down there.

I met Larry Washington, the conga player, MFSB. He said, "What do you do?" I said, "I play piano." He took me to Studio B—nobody was in there at that time. He said, "Show me what you can do." So I played a little medley. He said, "You know what,

I got a cousin named Major Harris. They're going to make a big star out of him. He's going to need a band." So that's how I got in the door.

Wow.

I met other musicians; Sugar Bear, Michael "Sugar Bear" Foreman, Michael 21X "Sugar Bear" Foreman. David 30X, David Cruz, percussionist with MFSB, Sugar Bear's bass player. Sugar Bear got me the gig with Barbara Mason and the Futures. Back with Billy Paul. And with Teddy Pendergrass, you know.

So. And then I got started loving the Sound of Philadelphia. So it was like part of my DNA.

But the thing with our trio [the Alfie Pollitt Trio, with Alan Nelson and Richard Hill Jr.], is an outlet for me to be able to express myself. Because we've had maybe two rehearsals since we got together, over five years. Because we all know inside and out these certain songs. And we just go and we create. And it's like medicine, healing, for us and the people and everything. But the R&B stuff is so: specific.

If you been to the Uptown Theater, you go hear somebody singing, and stuff is missing from the record and don't sound like the record, people will boo you and stuff. So my thing was, when I got into the R&B, I was around people like Sam Reed, Bobby Martin the arranger, Bunny Sigler, and we had played stuff the way, close to the record. Roland Chambers, Karl Chambers.

Thom Bell?

Yeah. So it's a job. It's like a job, and requires rehearsing and rehearsal and rehearsal. Which can be a lot. It's a blessing but can be a lot of stress, you know, to have to—just to perfect. But I do a gig, and we just like—yesterday, nonchalant. We come on in and you know, people, they love us and we love them, and hey.

Right, right.

So it's like a balance.

It's a very important question, because a lot of people these days that are into Jazz look down on R&B. Just like you said, even back then. If you went over to R&B, or if you did fusion like Norman, they said, "Well, you done sold out, you're not doing straight ahead, you're not doing hard bop." But this, I mean, this is very revealing for me. Because I've always felt that R&B is a high art form. Especially the Philly sound. Motown too. But you know, high art. And you just, when you said about the practice and—

Time you put in, and maybe—"Chop that noise!" you know, from neighbors and whatever, what have you.

COMPOSERS, ARRANGERS, AND THE BLACK ROMANTIC IDEAL

I was with the short brother who plays alto, can't remember his name right now. But we happened to run into him at Reading Terminal. And I asked him about William Hart Muhammad. And he said, he felt that William Hart Muhammad—

Oh, you mean Foster [Child]?

Foster! Foster. Foster.

I met Foster through Byard. He was one of Byard's young boys.

And Foster said that he believed that William Hart Muhammad is our Pavarotti.

Okay. I think I can relate. I know Russell, he was one of Russell's influences. Major influence. Russell studied him a lot. Poogie inspired him to do what he does. So I guess its succession would be William Hart, Russell, and then Ted Mills of Blue Magic—they came over later.

Could I ask you about Thom Bell? Because I feel he takes too much credit. But a lot of people think he's one of the greatest producers and arrangers. Now I know he had a big hand in the Stylistics. But I feel that Poogie—it's like sometimes if you get the sense that Thom Bell made Poogie. And I'm thinking that Poogie made Thom Bell.

Mm, ok. My spin on this is. According to Thommy and I talking—we met when we were children; Thom Bell. I would say one of the greatest arrangers.

Okay.

The thing about Thom Bell arranging was he would get the conception of everything. Full. And write everything down. Earl Young said you couldn't work during a Thom Bell session unless you could read. *Everything* was written. The tambourine part. The oboe part. All the string parts, all the piano parts, you know, was written.

When Thom Bell was inducted into the American Songwriters Hall of Fame, he's doing a medley of pieces that he's either written or played. But he's playing, and singing. He's a great singer. Everything he's playing, and it's like—I said, it's got to be Thom Bell. Because everything he's doing, he's reading. He has a page turner, you know. So whatever that myth, it was dispelled, whatever the myth was. He said everything gotta be written, you know.

Remember that song "Life is a Song Worth Singing"?

I was listening to it just this morning.

Oh, you listen to the arrangement on that? Him and Linda Creed wrote that song, and, well—he did it on Johnny Mathis. I mean, Thommy. Thom Bell, from what I understand, he was asked by Gamble and Huff to be a partner of Philadelphia International Records. But he wanted the independence to be able to just focus on arranging, production and stuff. And so he was an independent guy.

I'm glad you clarified. That Thom Bell is one of the greatest arrangers. I've heard other people say it, but I didn't believe it.

Well. Another great arranger was Bobby Martin. Bobby did "Me and Mrs. Jones." He did "The Sound of Philadelphia." He did "[Got My] Head on Straight." He did "Thanks for Saving My Life." So much stuff. Bobby Martin. See, Bobby played with Lynn Hope. Lynn Hope was a saxophone player. Bobby played vibes with him.

You ever heard that song "Back in Love Again" by LTD? That's his arrangement. I mean, so much—The Manhattans stuff. And Joe Simon. And MFSB and, so much stuff.

We had two great arrangers. Simultaneously. Matter of fact, some of the first Philly International stuff that came out was two arrangers, Thommy and Bobby, on "Backstabbers." Both of them, co-arranged on that. And a few other pieces too, you know what I mean.

Great. I mean, like Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. You heard of him.

(Laughs) [Du Bois's] The Immortal Child.

On that level, you know what I mean.

Really? Samuel Coleridge. You put him on that level?

That's where I put him.

Damn.

I mean, I got the rights to say that.

You got the rights, yeah. Wow. Alfie.

"... Over time, I've been blessed to be able to open up. Tough job, somebody got to do it. Why not oneself?"

See, my father introduced me to Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. My father played cello in the Philadelphia Concert orchestra. Black Symphony Orchestra in Philly, which existed from the '30s to the '60s.

We're trying to refresh ourselves on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. It's what Du Bois wrote about in "The Immortal Child." Instead of being snuffed out as so many colored children are, the right chances allowed him to become such a great composer. Pianist. But then he worked so hard that he passed away at 37. He was also born in Britain, which is also interesting, in the Du Boisian period. But that's even a forerunner of all of these great musicians.

It's a blessing that we're able to share and tell these stories.

Now dig this here. Coming up man—cats like y'all, man. 'Cause y'all got *words* and this and that. But see. Over time, I've been blessed to be able to open up. Tough job, somebody got to do it. Why not oneself?

I find it so fascinating that you put Thom and Bobby Martin in the thing with Samuel Coleridge Taylor.

And Tom Washington, the arranger for Earth, Wind & Fire. Tom Washington, they called him Tom Tom. Tom Tom 84. Quincy. Kashif. Leon Silvers. Prince. Stevie. All these world-class individuals have their own voice and own way of, skillset that—can't compare nobody.

Like Huey Piano Smith, the guy who did "Rockin' Pneumonia." In New Orleans, back in the—that stuff, and the doo wop stuff.

The doo wop stuff in the '50s. Man, that stuff touches so many people and brings generations together, man. I mean, happiness and love, across races and everything, man. It's a whole of stuff. A lot people, like the Europeans, they'll say, "Well *he's* better than *him*," and all that kind of stuff.

Here you have these two musical worlds that you're in. Deeply in both of them. Jazz: straight ahead and avant-garde. And R&B. And I know it was fascinating for me to hear you talk about, and you said it today, how elevated a musical form R&B is.

How great of a musical form. And that Thom Bell, you compared Thom Bell to Samuel Coleridge.

I would say Thom Bell, yeah. As an arranger and an orchestrator.

And I recall you saying last time how much went into composing and producing R&B. And also performing it at a really high level for the people who have come to love the songs and the albums so much and look up to someone like Teddy Pendergrass. You were saying something about how even on a concert level, like if you go to hear that song, and it's not quite played right, that is actually something—you have to rise to the demands of the people. That anchorage is really special it seems. I feel like I didn't understand that entirely. How different playing jazz for that audience, playing R&B for that audience. I mean both is for the people, but in really different ways. R&B almost pushes you further in some ways, would you say that?

You ever go to the Uptown Theater back in the day where somebody, you heard their record on the radio. And when they got on the show, it didn't sound like the record? Yeah, that's because this R&B, it's so specific. The ingredients in it. That make, that give that sound. If the pieces are missing, it sounds wack, you know what I mean.

Some people called me, they said they want me to put together a Sound of Philly thing. I said, "Well I got to think it out." They say, such and such amount: "Can you work with that?" I said, "Not really." Because if you want these songs and this kind of thing, I got to hire singers. I got to rehearse them. I got to pay the people for rehearsals and, you know, figure out which key, even change keys for certain people's vocal ranges and what have you, you know. Then, working with some musicians that can read music. And some that can't. The learning curve to be able to pull that together is, you know. It's more than a notion.

And if you listen to what Thom Bell did, some of that stuff is just like—for example, the song that him and Linda Creed wrote called "Life Is A Song Worth Singing." Listen to the illustration of strings and—it just builds. It's like if you go to the Academy of Music, see the Philadelphia Orchestra. It's that deep, I mean, as far as the musical events that take place within the music. And Thom Bell. He would not hire any musician, even a tambourine player that could not read music. Because his inspiration was—entire inspiration came to him. He knew what, everything he wanted, and he'd write everything out. And if you listen to his music, it's so much ear candy. So much stuff happening within it, that makes it. And it's like, pieces stand on their own, but they all make it, all shake hands together you know what I mean.

It sounds like Philadelphia has made one of the most sophisticated contributions to R&B as a tradition.

An original sound. New Orleans had a great original sound, you know what I mean. Chicago. Detroit. Memphis. New York. Other places, Ohio, all the funk stuff. The Isley Brothers. Roger Troutman. Bootsy Collins. And Catfish and all them people.

Could you say more about the orchestral elements in R&B?

Well, say for example, Thom Bell. I would say, "Dun dun dun—dun da, da da." At the beginning, it's like, I think it's like tuba and celeste. That combination. You wouldn't hear that—that may be the world's first, somebody using that combination of instruments in that setting.

Was that Stylistics, "Break Up to Make Up?"

Right right, and that's one of the songs him and Linda Creed wrote as well.

Why did he put those two together?

Because he's Thom Bell; that's what he chose to do. I mean, you know, I'm glad he did.

I wanted to ask if you could name a few artists and musicians that inspire you in the city today.

Who are living now?

Who are living now.

Living now, hm. Who's around now? Odean Pope. Fred Joiner, he played trombone with MFSB. He doesn't live here but he's around, he's still with us. Mother Father Sister Brother Band.

Oh, I never knew that's what it stands for.

Yeah, and then there's another spin on it too. But we won't go into that. (Laughs) Mother Father Sister Brother Band. 'Cause it was, some of the musicians were string players from the Philadelphia Orchestra. And you had women. You had men, you know. You had R&B. And so-called Western classical people as a *family*. Musical family. To create those, with the arrangers like Thom Bell and Bobby Martin and others, and Norman Harris, and Roland Chambers would create this music for them to play, and it had a unique, yeah.

Did Billy Paul always sing R&B?

No, back then he was singing jazz. I think he said

that one of his main influences was Little Jimmy Scott. And then like, you know, he liked Charlie Parker.

That's interesting. Look, Little Jimmy Scott was a man who sang like a woman. He sound like Dinah Washington. Because if I could just—didn't Little Jimmy Scott, wasn't his role models and singing seemed to be like women like Dinah Washington?

I never really studied his—I can relate. Like Luther Vandross's models were women, Dionne Warwick, you know.

So Billy was influenced vocally by Little Jimmy Scott and otherwise by Charlie Parker.

Well, like jazz; the jazz scatting, and bebop and all that stuff, sure. See, 'cause back in the day there was some musicians, singers, that could sing with so-called jazz people and then some that couldn't. But he was like, it was organic, it was natural. It wasn't like "I'mma sing like this today," you know, just to be doing something and not really have solid roots, a foundation with that.

Could I just ask another question about Billy Paul?

Go ahead.

'Cause you influenced them when you were riding back from New York about Billy Paul.

Oh yeah. Y'all like—what's the name of that song?

(Singing) July, July, July, July.

There you go. Y'all supposed to say it in unison. Come on, now.

July, July, July, July / Oh me oh me oh my.

And see, like. That song is the sound of Bobby Martin's arrangement. You know what I mean. It's like, it's just classic.

Just say a little more about Bobby Martin.

Well, you ever hear the song called "Back in Love Again?" By LTD. *Dun dun dun dun, dun dun. Every time I go around / Back in love again.* Jeffrey Osborne, for LTD. That was one of his arrangements.

"The Horse"—the flip side of "Love is All Right." What's the guy's name; Cliff Nobles. It was an early Philly R&B record, you know. It had a flip side, "The Horse" was the instrumental version, of just the instruments, no singing. But the same song that's on the other side with Cliff Nobles, who was from Norristown, singing lead on it, you know, the lead singer.

But it's like supposedly the first MFSB, a song wherein the feature is just the musicians, what they did, you know. Without any specific melody. Just like MFSB. You take away all the vocals and you hear all the percolation of different instruments and working together and grooving and everything.

Bunny Sigler was a singer. But he's also famous for writing some important songs for Patti LaBelle and other people.

And other people.

What are some of the songs he wrote?

"Stairway to Heaven," O'Jays. "Your Body's Here With Me (But Your Mind's On the Other Side of Town)." "I'll Be Around," The Spinners. "Somebody Loves You," he did that on Patti. "If Only You Knew." And so much stuff. He didn't really get his due. For all he did. He could have been like a Frank Sinatra, or something like that.

Even as a singer.

Man, he out sang just about everybody I know.

Really.

So, Bunny. I mean, I used to be down at Philly International with the songwriters, and you know, so I kind of learned some of the formula of how to write a song and stuff. I just got some, started feeling some confidence; I would ask different people to sit, to collaborate with me. So I was blessed to do a song with Phil Terry of The Intruders. He's the only surviving Intruder. We wrote a song together. And I hit up on Bunny. So we wrote a song. It hasn't come out yet but it's—he sang, oh, man. He did all the leads and backgrounds.w

Also, he did Othello. In Italy.

Othello.

Othello, in Italy. The people hired him over there to come over there, and he did that.

Did the musical?

He sang.

Sang. This is blowing my motherfucking mind. Bunny.

Watch your mouth.

(Laughs) Walter.

Seriously. He was a great talent.

Colored Modernity

BY NANDITA CHATURVEDI

We live in times that seem desperate, violent, and tragic, yet hopeful. Even as the world passes through a period of erupting violence, a horrific genocide in Gaza and an overdrawn war in Ukraine, the Western world's sun is setting. Through these conflicts the American ruling elite tries to hold on to a time that is ending: one of its unchallenged domination. We are moving on to a time that contains the seeds for a new world order, a new stage in the development of world democracy. No one who has witnessed the recent BRICS summit at Kazan can deny this possibility. Those who feel this most keenly are the colored masses of the world. Having overthrown colonialism one or two generations ago, the children of that political freedom have now become the first to receive an education, to reach economic and social stability. The darker world stands at a precipice of a new colored modernity.

This new stage will not be the modernity outlined by Francis Fukuyama; it will not fulfill the manifest destiny envisioned by the white world. Rather, it will be defined by the darker masses of the world who have achieved a voice in their own affairs, and in world affairs for the first time. The societies and social systems of much of the Third World, especially India and China, have undergone many profound changes in the last 75 years. There has been widespread urbanization, and the development of a robust and stable middle class. On the other hand, the rural is no longer isolated or untouched by the fresh air of information. The village knows what happens in Delhi, or Seoul, or New York. There has emerged a new consciousness among the people, who are becoming aware of themselves in the world.

Charles White, Mahalia, 1955. Collection Pamela and Harry Belafonte.

The masses of these people are not white, nor do they crave to live with white standards. They carry with them deep rooted traditions and ideas of beauty. They do not want to look like they have been dressed by Zara, or *want* to eat at Jewish bakeries. They do not fetishize the material world, and largely do not depend on *things* or labels to know their self-worth. They carry with them ancient religion and morality, not easily uprooted from their lifeworlds, despite hundreds of years of Western colonialism. Perhaps even more significantly, they carry with them the memory of their struggles for liberation in the 20th century, a bastion against Western ideas of progress and success.

What then will modern Afro-Asiatic societies look like? I will argue in this essay that *colored modernity* has its first example in the African American experience, and the Black social system that is forged from it. Modernity all over Africa and Asia will follow certain social patterns that have their first expression in Afro-America and will look more like the Black American lifeworld than Europe or white America.

AFRO-AMERICA: COLORED MODERNITY

The African American people were brought to the New World in chains, and their ties to their civilizational roots forcefully and brutally severed. Yet, in their uniquely American experience, they created from that rubble a new civilizational foundation. The social system and lifeworld of the African American people has been studied in depth by Black sociologists and intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Angela Davis. I will attempt here to recount some of the main points that serve our argument of a new colored modernity.

First, under slavery, the Black family unit was under constant attack from the slave owners. The treatment of these human beings as chattel never allowed the traditional family unit of the Afro-Asiatic world to re-establish itself. Individuals were bought, sold, and moved around with little to no regard to their emotional attachments to family members. While in general no family relationships were respected, the mother-child relationship was allowed to exist in some ways more than the father-child relationship. Black mothers and children were sometimes treated as a unit. Rape was legal in slavery, and children between slave masters and Black women were common. Even after Emancipation, marital ties were always loose, as men often left homes to search for work. As E. Franklin Frazier lays out in his seminal work *The Negro Family in the U.S.,* what emerged from Black people's struggle against this system was a matriarchy where the mothers, and significantly grandmothers, would serve as heads of the family. Even today, under the white supremacist U.S. state, one in four Black men are likely to be incarcerated at some point in their life, continuing the historic attack of the U.S. ruling class on Black men.

Another effect of the attack on the family unit in slavery was the absence of traditional roles for women in the household that exist in much of Asia and Africa. As Angela Davis argues in her book *Women, Race, and Class*, slavery allowed no distinction between men and women with respect to the work on the plantation. Women were expected to work as hard as men, bearing the additional burden of childbirth. Women would work through their pregnancies. Thus, Black women were, from the very beginning of their American experience, workers. As part of the proletariat, even after Emancipation, they never came to accept their role as traditional wives or mothers, which white women performed in the same nation. Black women, ironically, were freed from the bonds of patriarchy to an extent by their role in the slave workforce. This means that women in the Black community have always had a consciousness that was qualitatively different from women in the Afro-Asiatic villages. They are assertive and confident. Most notably, their role as equal partners of Black men in the struggle for Black liberation has never been in question.

This reflects itself prominently in the relationship between men and women in the Black community. It can be argued that men and women are seen as equal partners, with women often defining the terms of their relationships. Black women have not been a part of the feminist movement for sexual freedom in America because their relationship to Black men does not necessitate such a struggle. White feminism does not question white supremacy directly, and Black women do not see themselves ultimately in the struggle for sexual freedom. Polyandry is not uncommon in the black community today, with children often being raised by mothers with external support from the father. This is in contrast to women of the Afro-Asiatic world, whose struggle to be freed from traditional roles in the home was part of the anticolonial struggle. Yet all the questions of the emergence of a new Afro-Asiatic man and woman from the ancient clan structures (and their distortion by colonialism) could not be settled as the newly freed nations struggled against crippling poverty and illiteracy.

Perhaps this different man-woman dynamic is made most clear through a study of Black music. Sexual themes are very common in the music of women Blues singers such as Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, and Dinah Washington. In this music, the women do not describe themselves as shy or coy, but openly call on men to rise to the challenge of their relationship. They are not bashful about wanting sex or pleasure, and explicit in their wording. On the other hand, Black men musicians such as Teddy Pendergrass, Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, and Otis Redding display a kind of tender sexuality in their music, in contrast to the harsh and crass images of manhood in the white world. In this music is expressed the Black romantic ideal, which places romantic love in relationship with a higher consciousness, a love for humanity and God.

As mentioned before, the Black family unit was not allowed to thrive under slavery. Yet, what did establish itself in American soil during slavery was the *Black community* through the practice of Black religion. As Du Bois argues, "The black church precedes the black family on American Soil." This church, in Du Bois's words, was *everything African.* The Black church was not only a religious institution, but served as a place of relief and release from the pressures of slavery. Even more significantly, it served as a place of organization, and a place of struggle for Black people. This role of the Black church would reach its peak in the Civil Rights movement. The theology of the Black church, then, was different and maybe even a negation of white theology in America which sought to justify the race hypothesis. It placed its emphasis upon freedom, and love. Perhaps the closest parallel to this liberation theology was Gandhi's satyagraha, but even then Gandhi was struggling against conservative streams of Hinduism, a product of the colonial era, that did not see religion as a place of struggle. In contrast, the mainstream of the Black church pushed towards the struggle for freedom. In sum, the Black church melded together the political, spiritual, and ideological to more fully capture the experience and imagination of its congregations.

The church also cemented another aspect of Black life: the collective raising of children. At its best, adults in the Black community see all Black children, and even sometimes children of other races, as their own. The constant onslaught from the white world created a special tenderness in the community towards children, who ultimately could not be protected against white oppression. As Baldwin writes,"The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be

Sunday Morning Breakfast by Horace Pippin, 1943.

incapable of morality." Black children are celebrated in the community when the community is strong. They are empowered to speak and express themselves, and every victory (birthdays, school graduations) is celebrated. This is against the backdrop of violence, especially police violence, which threatens to end every child's life too early, or to lock them away in prison.

Another aspect of Black life I want to highlight is the conceptualization of the *human being* in society. Amiri Baraka argues in his work *Blues People* that the development of the blues in America can be traced as being parallel to the development of the African American. As blues music emerged from more primitive folk and work songs, using a language that was distinctly African American, so the African American people emerged from the Africans in America. Further, the blues are essentially a personal, an individual music, distinct from more communal folk forms. As Paul Robeson writes, "While Spirituals, work songs and songs of protest are collective creations and are performed collectively among the people, the blues (that is, lyrical songs, most frequently about love) express the emotional state of the individual." The blues, in other words, articulate the experience of the *Black human being* in America. Thus they reflect a consciousness that is based on the unit of the human being, but not detached from the collective people or struggle he or she is part of. Despite being individual in their expression, they are not individualistic. We will come back to this aspect, since this unique view of the human being that exists within the context of the group and its struggle must be a feature of colored modernity. Lastly, Black music that draws on the blues, rhythm and blues, or jazz for example is a distinctly urban music.

Further, the tradition of blues in Black music can be seen as the first exercise in the *autobiography* of Black people. This was developed further by African American writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and others in novels, short stories, and essays. African American music and literature may be the first expression of autobiography for the world's dark proletariat. As Baldwin says in his *Uses of the Blues,* "I want to talk about the blues not only because they speak of this particular experience of life and state of being, but because they contain the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate." He says further, "These artists [Ray Charles and Miles Davis], in their very different ways, sing a kind of universal blues, they speak of something far beyond their charts, graphs, statistics, they are telling us something about what it is like to be alive. It is not self-pity which one hears in them, but compassion. And perhaps this is the place for me to say that I really do not, at the very bottom of my own mind, compare myself to other writers. I think I really helplessly model myself on jazz musicians and try to write the way they sound. I am not an intellectual, not in the dreary sense that word is used today, and do not want to be: I am aiming at what Henry James called 'perception at the pitch of passion.'" Owing to the special racial oppression of the U.S., Jim Crow laws, and the one-drop rule, educated Black artists remained proletarian in their consciousness and imaginary. Artists such as James Baldwin can be seen as the first voice of the *world proletariat in becoming*, and Black writing can be seen as the precursor to a new kind of literature

that will emerge from among the darker races as the proletariat becomes aware of their role in history and script history consciously. The literature that will emerge from their articulation of their experience will form a new kind of autobiography of a people.

I have tried to illustrate what emerges from a sociology of Black America that does not reduce Black life to stereotypes: one of a people who have undergone a rapid development of a system of values and *Black social system* in the struggle to survive. I would like to conclude this illustration with the Black view of white life. Their extreme and direct experience with white oppression has allowed Black people to question in fundamental ways the assumptions of white society. As Baldwin says, "The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed the collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace, that Americans have always dealt honorably with Mexicans and Indians and all other neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world's most direct and virile, that American women are pure. Negroes know far more about white Americans than that; it can almost be said, in fact, that they know about white Americans what parents—or, anyway, mothers—know about their children, and that they very often regard white Americans that way." Much of the Afro-Asiatic world still is grappling with questions or stages of social development that African Americans have had to necessarily settle. What is most concrete in Black American life—the white man—can be more abstract in Africa or Asia. Is European Modernity the only modernity? The resounding answer from Afro-America is No.

WHAT IS MODERN?

Francis Fukuyama's work *The End of History and the Last Man* lay the basis for the triumphant West's declaration that the development of human history had indeed come to an end with the crushing of the Soviet Union, and the victory of the Western liberal democratic state. Human beings, and in particular, white human beings, had reached the perfect social and economic system that captured the human search for Truth. White civilization had done it, and now the rest of the world just had to catch up to their perfection.

Fukuyama's book builds the argument that just as Hegel had theorized, there is in fact a Universal History of Mankind. This is a history with a direction, as humanity moves to higher and higher stages of development, despite setbacks. He identifies this forward development with the course taken by Western nations, with the West's material prosperity and its evolution to liberal democracy. He investigates the Mechanism by which this progress takes place, in other words, the motor force or driving force of history. He identifies Science and its product, technology, as the core of this Mechanism.

Yet this time calls for a profound re-thinking of Fukuyama's thesis. The West is in decline; materially, in the community of nations, and ideologically. Western intellectuals are "unable to turn the key in the lock" having developed modern science, as Paul Robeson had predicted. They must rely on Indian and Chinese graduate students to carry out their scientific and social scientific research. The Western ruling elite has lost all semblance of rational or liberal thought, pushing the world to the brink of nuclear war that could end humanity. It is in this time that we must examine the thinkers that critiqued Western modernity and conceptualized alternatives.

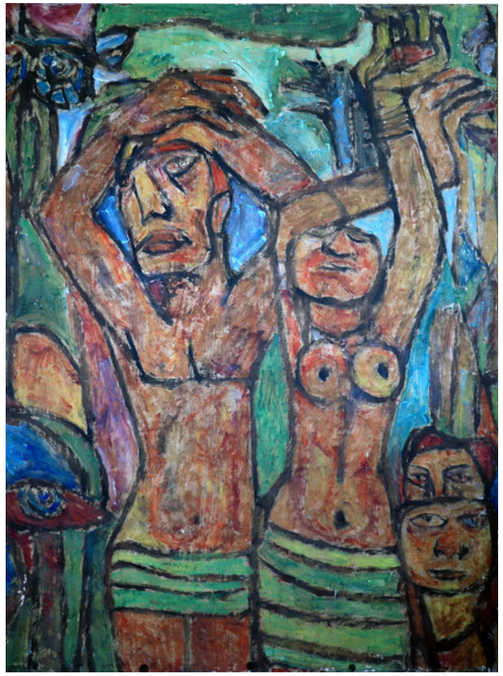
We critique Fukuyama and Western thought without collapsing into postmodernism and subjectivism. There is indeed a Universal History of Man, which takes into account "the experience of all times and all peoples." This history does present a direction, but the question demands to be asked, whose history is indeed Universal History? James Baldwin puts the white man's History in contrast with Time,

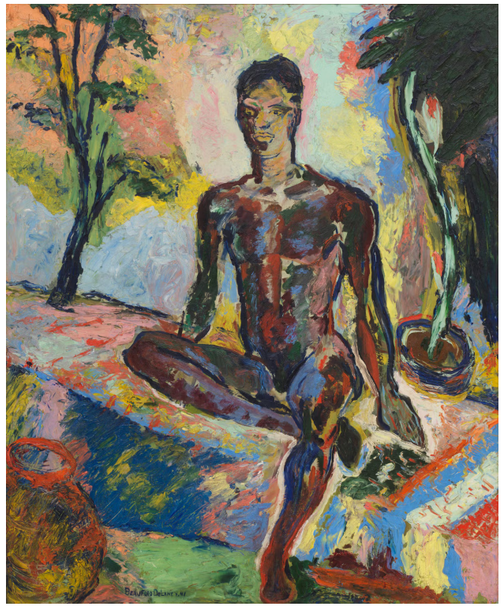
> She must change.
> Yes. History must change.
> A slow, syncopated
> relentless music begins
> suggesting her re-entry,
> transformed, virginal as she was,
> in the Beginning, untouched,
> as the Word was spoken,
> before the rape which debased her
> to be the whore of multitudes, or,
> as one might say, before she became the Star,
> whose name, above our title,
> carries the Show, making History the patsy,
> responsible for every flubbed line,
> every missed cue, responsible for the life
> and death, of all bright illusions
> and dark delusions,
> Lord, History is weary
> of her unspeakable liaison with Time,
> for Time and History
> have never seen eye to eye:
> Time laughs at History
> and time and time and time again
> Time traps History in a lie.
>
> But we always, somehow, managed
> to roar History back onstage
> to take another bow,
> to justify, to sanctify
> the journey until now.

Time warned us to ask for our money back,
and disagreed with History
as concerns colours white and black.
Not only do we come from further back,
but the light of the Sun
marries all colours as one.

Baldwin is asking us to question the lie that the White world has contorted History into. Baldwin is telling us that Time, which reflects the reality of the darker world, has never accepted the way in which History is made to parade in order to justify their oppression. Darker people all over the world will reject in Time the notion that they must catch up to Western liberal democracy. W.E.B. Du Bois's *The World and Africa* also addresses the lie of white History. Du Bois says, "A system at first conscious then unconscious of lying about history then distorting it to the disadvantage of the Negroids became so widespread that the history of Africa ceased to be taught, the color of Memnon was forgotten, and every effort was made in archaeology, history, and biography, in biology, psychology and sociology, to prove the all but universal assumption that the color line had a scientific basis." Hence, for thinkers such as Baldwin and Du Bois, European and White modernity is built upon the exploitation of the darker world, and the claim of Western superiority rests on the denial of this fact. Fukuyama analyzes Hitler as an anomaly in the trajectory of Western History, while Du Bois and Baldwin saw Nazism as a logical extension of white supremacy and colonialism. One wonders how Fukuyama understands today the Israeli state, as maybe another anomaly?

Du Bois explores in his unpublished manuscript *Russia and America* social systems and forms of governance that could emerge from within and serve the darker world. He says, "It would take a new way of thinking on Asiatic lines to work this out; but there would be a chance that out of India, out of Buddhism and Shintoism, out of the age-old virtues of Japan and China itself, to provide for this different kind of Communism, a thing which so far all attempts at a socialistic state in Europe have failed to produce; that is a communism with its Asiatic stress on character, on goodness, on spirit, through family loyalty and affection might ward of Thermidor; might stop the tendency of Western socialistic state to freeze into bureaucracy. It might through the philosophy of Gandhi and Tagore, of Japan and China, really create a vast democracy into which the ruling dictatorship of the proletariat would fuse and deliquesce; and thus instead of socialism even becoming a stark negation of the freedom of thought and a tyranny of action and propaganda of science and art, it would expand to a great democracy of spirit." Indeed, Western critics have been predicting the collapse of the Chinese state since its very foundation. Yet, modern China has shown that social and political systems can differ in their paths to achieving democracy. As the rest of Asia and Africa rise to a new standard of living, democracy





Left: Artwork by T.K. Padmini, Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, Trissur.
Right: Dark Rapture (James Baldwin) by Beauford Delaney, 1941.

will be achieved through varied civilizational trajectories that will be determined by the masses of these civilizations. Despite talking repeatedly about "democracy" Fukuyama and liberal theory fail to realize this fundamental fact. Indian democracy, for example, will have to contend with its non-violent inheritance, as well as what D.D. Kosambi calls "a living prehistory."

Thus, History is being written as we speak. It is being written by the masses of Russia and China in their support for their governments' move towards de-dollarization. It is being written in the actions of the Axis of Resistance against Israel. The Universal History of Mankind yet has many questions to work out, and these will be settled in practice, by the forging of a new colored modernity. What will drive us towards this modernity? As Fukuyama challenges us, what will be its Mechanism?

When Rabindranath Tagore had visited China in 1924, a group of young activists criticized his visit, arguing that what China needed was not "ancient wisdom" but Western modernism, science, and democracy. To this Tagore had replied, "The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern: I am on its side, for I am modern." He challenged his critics: "If you want to reject me, you are free to do so. But I have my right as a revolutionary to carry the flag of freedom of spirit into the shrine of your idols—material power and accumulation." What Tagore was pointing to was that science and technology are but tools for the nurturing and growth of the human spirit; it is always the *human being* who thinks that is the driving force of history. Martin Luther King Jr. would criticize Western science for becoming rapacious without commensurate spiritual progress. He said, "The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. (...) Every man lives in two realms, the internal and the external. The internal is that realm of spiritual ends expressed in art, literature, morals, and religion. The external is that complex of devices, techniques, mechanisms, and instrumentalities by means of which we live. Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live."

The Western ruling elite believe that human capabilities have been exhausted. They have nothing but contempt and disdain for human creativity, as can be seen from the Nobel prizes awarded to work in artificial intelligence this year. They think that the future of creative work rests upon machines and technology. We argue, building on Tagore and Martin Luther King Jr., that the motive force of history is not scientific development but the democratic emancipatory struggle of the masses of the world's people. Human consciousness of the masses of people and its struggle to assert itself forms History. It is through this struggle that human consciousness itself can reach new modes and levels. Science must be harnessed and controlled by the spiritual ends of man to become truly revolutionary. Jawaharlal Nehru of India was influenced deeply by the formulations of Vinobha Bhave that in the modern age politics and religion would give way to science and spirituality.

The modern period will be marked by the *dark human being* coming into his own. His or her consciousness will not be the consciousness of Western individualism, for it will not be overdetermined by the extreme narcissism of a colonial empire. It will find ways of being and acting in the world that can address individual creativity and expression, with service to and the cohesion of the collective. In order to do this, the paradigm of Western individualism and liberal democracy must first be dethroned and the veil of white supremacy removed from our thinking.

Only in Afro-America can one find an individual consciousness of this kind, which is not only different from the white American consciousness, but in many ways a negation of it. The Black struggle for freedom conceptualizes freedom in a collective, humanity-wide sense, while not giving up on the category of the *human being*. One can see this illustrated, for example, in the novels of James Baldwin.

In the ways I have tried to illustrate above, African Americans have created a *Black social system* that is uniquely modern, in many ways urban, and allows them to address the questions faced by human kind in the modern, industrial world. Men and women of the darker world will break away from earlier clan and feudal relations to ones which allow for their human aspirations, struggles, and desires to be expressed more freely. Further, they will have to struggle against what Baldwin calls a white *way of life* which is so readily adopted by their elite and used to put them down. This elite is tied inextricably to the Western world order, especially to the American university system that trains them ideologically. In the coming time, they will either have to reorient towards their own people, or perish into irrelevance with the white world. New social and ideological relationships will emerge in humanity, as religion and politics transform into spirituality and science. I contend that these will resemble more and more Black America. As the world moves forward, the African American experience must be studied and known by the world's people. This article attempts to only provide inspiration and direction for further study and thought.

Relocating the Revolutionary James Baldwin

BY EMILY DONG AND PURBA CHATTERJEE

On August 2, 2024, to celebrate James Baldwin on his hundredth birth anniversary, the Saturday Free School for Philosophy and Black Liberation premiered an original documentary titled "To Fulfill the Unfulfilled, to Answer the Unanswered: The Revolutionary James Baldwin." The documentary strives to relocate James Baldwin—the Man and the Revolutionary—in the struggle that forged him, and clarify his role in our time as an indispensable theorist and philosopher for the American revolutionary process.

This clarification is timely, coming at an urgent moment when there is an ideological battle being waged by the ruling elite to redefine and narrow Baldwin's legacy, and sever him from the Black Freedom Movement. This project attempts to reinvent Baldwin as a queer cultural icon for the ruling elite, for whom race and sexuality are mere identity categories, despite Baldwin himself never having identified as such. It separates him from the Black poor, whose suffering and whose right to freedom and dignity are at the center of his concern. What is deeply unfortunate is that some Black intellectuals are complicit in this attempt to assassinate Baldwin a hundred years after his birth by distorting his place in history and obscuring the substance of his message for our times.

The documentary establishes Baldwin, first and foremost, as a Revolutionary Black Man—inseparable from Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Freedom Movement—who saw himself as a witness and freedom fighter in the struggle to transform the American people. Importantly, the documentary makes the assertion that in order to see Baldwin as a revolutionary theorist and philosopher, it is essential to identify the historical chronology that leads to his art, novels, essays, poems, plays, and theorizing.

By chronology, we mean a logic of historical development that informs theory and practice for one who enters the stage of history as an agent of change and freedom. Most people believe that America is the "land of freedom" founded by the bourgeois revolution of 1776 from British tyranny. Liberals believe that this bourgeois revolution achieved freedom and defend the Constitution which codified individual rights. Many other people who believe that there remains an unfinished task to defeat oppression and inequality in American society, from progressives to democratic socialists and leftists, say the only revolutionary possibility in America is a socialist restructuring of the state and society. Their chronology begins with the European revolutions of 1848, and is carried forward by the thought of Karl Marx and V.I. Lenin, which asserts that all history is the history of the class struggle.

In contrast, Baldwin's chronology begins at the auction block with the enslaved proletariat—"the demolition, by Europe, of all human standards." His revolutionary thinking goes back to Frederick Douglass and the anti-slavery struggle, to the defeat of Reconstruction—the second American revolution—necessitating a third American Revolution: the Black Freedom Movement of the '50s through the '70s. This chronology articulates the historically constituted consciousness of Black folk, grounded in the understanding that the American democratic revolution had failed them. It holds up to light the unanswered questions that Baldwin asks time and again through his writings: How is it that slavery ended, but Black people are not yet free? However, he asked the additional question, which is: Are white people free, if Black people are unfree?

I Have a Dream, #11 by Charles White, 1968.

The nation is in one of the deepest crises of its history. There are those among the ruling elite, academicians, and public intellectuals, who seek to give Baldwin an identity which he never claimed. The modern LGBTQ movement, rather than take up the mantle of Baldwin, has adopted ideas and strategies that diminish Baldwin and the struggle against white supremacy.

This calls for a reassessment of what freedom means and has meant in America, as well as what it can be made to mean through a people's democratic revolution. At the same time, it is important to take a cold hard look at the queer movement, the freedom it offers, and what it says about whiteness and love. James Arthur Baldwin offers revolutionary answers to these questions by centering them on the Black poor, their great capacity for love and struggle, and the unfulfilled promise of the Black freedom movement.

FREEDOM

People in America believe that freedom is an individual's ability, with all of one's protected rights, to pursue and achieve the American Dream. In his 1965 debate with William Buckley, Baldwin dissects this assumption, asking: How can we in the West assume there is an American Dream, when one-ninth of the population has been excluded from it for four hundred years? If only white people, and most immigrants today, can materially achieve the American Dream while Black folk on the whole cannot, what is the price of this dream?

Baldwin contends that the great shock for a Black person was not his individual disaffection, demoralization, and impoverishment, but the realization that generation after generation, a whole people would suffer the same way with no way out:

"You are thirty by now, and nothing you have done has helped you escape the trap. But what is worse than that, is that nothing you have done, and as far as you can tell, nothing you can do, will save your son or your daughter from meeting the same disaster and not impossibly coming to the same end."

Buckley's answer to Baldwin represents the prevalent worldview of Americans to this day. For Buckley, the problem lies, not in the assumption of the American Dream, but in Black people. To him, their failure to climb up the ladder to the American Dream must be a mark of their own inferiority, for which the American Republic bears no responsibility. Thus, the condition of Black people in this country is a "Negro problem," rather than a crisis and responsibility of all of America. This assumption is so entrenched in the consciousness of ordinary Americans that it becomes absolutely crucial to dismantle it in order to clearly see what freedom the American people will have to fight for today, and how.

The American State, founded by the revolutionary overthrow of British tyranny, was one of the world's first modern "democracies" based upon the values of the European Enlightenment and a liberal political philosophy going back to John Locke. Locke proposed that men in nature have perfect freedom with God-given natural rights. Men give up some of their natural rights to leave nature and live in civil society, granting the State a common authority to protect the individual's right to life, liberty, and prosperity. This

Slave Ship by Romare Bearden, 1972.

is the social contract which is supposed to legitimize the American State and liberal democracy up till today, and the illusion that the citizen subject has certain inalienable freedoms protected under the Constitution.

However, this social contract was never guaranteed to Black people, even after Emancipation granted them limited citizenship rights. Although slavery was abolished, Black people were still denied the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness which citizenship under democracy promised. Baldwin describes this in his debate with Buckley: "It comes as a great shock around the age of five or six or seven to discover the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you."

How has an idea such as the American Dream, which fails to explain the reality of Black folk, persisted? There exists an entire social system constructed on the principles of white supremacy which reproduces Black oppression over historical time through law, modes of production, institutions, ideas, and values. By treating Black people as a separate and inferior class of citizens, the American social contract does not seem contradictory to Democracy. Significantly, after Emancipation, the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court ruling

in *Plessy v. Ferguson* made segregation constitutional and thereby granted legal protection to whiteness as a category. This codified the second-class citizenship of Black people.

The existence of a white supremacist social system, which must be surmounted, is the reason why—after the Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery, *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregated schools, and the Civil Rights Movement successfully forced the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act—Black people are still not free. There is still an unbending inequality that overdetermines the condition of a whole people, despite individual cases of economic success. One sinister manifestation is the disproportionate imprisonment of Black people, especially Black men; one-third of people in prison are Black, although only 13 percent of the population is Black. One in three Black men who are 40 years old today have either been to prison, are in prison, or will be in their lifetime. Almost half of the people serving life, life without parole, or "virtual life" sentences are Black. Thus prisons operate not to serve justice, or rehabilitate, but to remove and separate Black men from white society.

White people can choose to move to the suburbs or afford to send their children to private schools, while Black children fill "inner city" public schools. As long as it is Black children in those public schools, the schools will stay underfunded, understaffed, and at the bottom of the priority list. As long as it is Black children who are dying in the city's streets, the city will not make it an imperative—until the problem affects white people past their threshold of comfort and safety. As long as Black people can be separated from society, society and white people feel no need to take responsibility for Black neighborhoods, schools, children, and lives.

The mechanisms of control of the white supremacist social system have evolved with time to preserve the myth of whiteness. Yet, today as at the time of its conception, it serves the singular purpose of ensuring that most Black people will never rise, always be excluded, and always be poor. Most liberals, social democrats, and leftists have no answers for this conundrum. Many believe socialism is the only solution, ignoring that the oppression of Black people is not only desired but necessary for the white supremacist social system. For as long as there is a bottom, defined by Black people, there can be the myth of progress in the U.S. Rather than the success of society being defined by the state of life, liberty, and opportunity for a whole American people, success is defined by "mobility"—which in essence comes down to the distance between you and Black people.

Twenty generations of Black people in poverty and failing to achieve the American Dream is proof that the American Dream is a lie, and its standards are not worthy of the American people. Baldwin continues that not only is the American Dream a lie, but the American Dream is predicated on the racial exclusion and oppression of Black people. White people had to invent the myth of white supremacy and a fake sense of reality based upon Black inferiority in order to justify this exclusion, even though—ironically, as Baldwin points out—this country, North and South, was built by Black people through the enslavement and exploitation of Black labor. The white supremacist social system ensures that the "inalienable rights" at the crux of liberal democracy only extend to the white individual's rights to life, liberty, and prosperity, while Black folk perish in modern day ghettos.

Today, there are growing numbers of white poor people whose situation has never been more similar to that of the Black poor. This is the first time that the white poor are realizing that American democracy has failed them, too. The myth of bourgeois freedom is closer to failing in our time than ever before, which is why the ruling elite must invent a new way of reinforcing the myth. Immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are increasingly being used by the ruling elite to validate liberal democracy's success and mask white supremacy with a multicultural face. Immigrants can purchase access to the social contract and individual freedoms which Black folk are excluded from, what Baldwin called the price of the ticket: buying into the white sense of reality. This sense of reality convinces immigrants that America, over their own civilization and homeland, is the land of freedom and opportunity, because by subscribing to the standards of whiteness they can achieve the American Dream. Asian immigrants in particular can achieve more economic success in a single generation than African Americans have been able to for centuries.

Immigrants may choose to believe that this is the land of freedom and opportunity. It may be for them but certainly will never be for Black people. By choosing whiteness, they are consenting to upholding an unjust social system and are morally complicit in the reproduction of Black oppression. The question which faces the American people, especially immigrants today, is whether your so-called freedom, predicated on your human brothers' and sisters' generational suffering, is worth it. That is the moral and revolutionary choice before the American people.

Baldwin rejected bourgeois freedom. For Baldwin, this Anglo-Saxon construal of freedom was insufficient to answer any questions about the future of his people and fulfill emancipatory democracy. For Baldwin, there was only revolutionary freedom. If the protection of "freedoms" in this society depends on the oppression, unfreedom, and suffering of Black people, the only real freedom is the freedom to change society.

It is important to recognize that what the American State does to Black people at home is the same thing it does to the dark billions abroad through neo-colonial exploitation and war. As Baldwin says,

> "When Americans look out on the world, they see nothing but dark and menacing strangers who appear to have no sense of rhythm at all, nor any respect or affection for white people; and white Americans really do not know what to make of all this, except to increase the defense budget… When the American people, Nixon's no-longer-silent majority, revile the Haitian, Cuban, Turk, Palestinian, Iranian, they are really cursing the nigger, and the nigger had better know it."

This is how the American State's unabashed support for Israel's genocidal war on Gaza has to be seen: as a war in defense of white supremacy. Baldwin makes it clear that the "compulsive American dream of genocide" starts with the systematic destruction of Black folk. For Black folk, there is no such thing as individual freedom without the fight for the collective freedom of Black people. Thus, Baldwin would say that it was impossible to create "a separate peace" and that, "In America, I was free only in battle, never free to rest—and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle." The task is for all Americans to adopt this definition of freedom—that no individual can be free for as long as society is unfree from white supremacy.

Thus, Black people have historically been at the vanguard of the struggle for freedom in America and as part of the world anti-colonial and freedom movements. Ironically, as Baldwin notes, it is Black folk, the oppressed and disinherited, who are the most free and inject new meaning into freedom. On the other hand, it is white folk who are the most unfree and must be helped through struggle to shed their ideological chains of white supremacy:

> "It is not a question of whether they are going to give me any freedom. I am going to take my freedom. That problem is resolved. The real problem is the price. Not the price I will pay, but the price the country will pay. The price a white woman, man, boy, and girl will have to pay in themselves before they look on me as another human being. This metamorphosis is what we are driving toward, because without that we will perish—indeed, we are almost perishing now."

LOVE, IDENTITY & THE BLACK MAN

Celebrations centered around Baldwin's 100th birthday at the New York Public Library, Schomburg Center, National Portrait Gallery, and National Museum of African American History and Culture expose a reinvigorated effort on the part of the ruling elite to repackage Baldwin as a voice of the LGBTQ movement. This portrayal of Baldwin as a "fragile queer black man," traumatized by homophobia and unfree in his own lifetime, finally allowed to be "free" by the liberal intellectual in ours, is a grotesque project that trivializes Baldwin and disappears him from any serious investigation into the American crisis and its resolution. It is essential to investigate the agenda behind this ideological move and who it ultimately serves.

Firstly, the ruling elites' need to "queer" Baldwin stems from the danger he poses to them as a revolutionary Black man. Denied human dignity and any claim to his women or children in the time of chattel slavery, brutalized and lynched in the Jim Crow South, and today as the most impoverished, disproportionately incarcerated, and reviled of American citizens, the Black man in America has found himself in constant battle with the white supremacist social system. Baldwin holds up to light this criminal conspiracy mounted by white society to emasculate and debase the Black man—lest he forget his place. He argues that no matter the method employed, "the fact of the castration [of the Negro] is an American fact."

In conversations with Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde, Baldwin categorically rejects the feminist narrative characterizing Black men as abusive, misogynistic, and the principal cause for the misfortunes of Black women. He argues that while generations of injustice, indignity, and the denial of his manhood can stir rage and hatred in the Black man so potent that it often turns against him and his own, one can never lose sight of the fact that his condition is the intended outcome of an unjust social system that seeks to destroy him, and in the process destroy the Black woman, the Black child, and the Black family. In a letter to his 14 year old nephew, he insists that "it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime." He urges his young nephew, on the brink of manhood, to never believe what white society said he was or could become, and trust instead the evidence of his own experience.

Baldwin speaks as a Black man who had been "carried into precinct basements often enough" to know that "every black man walking in this country pays a tremendous price for walking." He had to leave America for Paris, not because he was queer, but because he was a Black man in mortal danger in the streets of Harlem. It is precisely his testimony as a Black man—forced to snatch his manhood and identity from the grasp of a criminal system and recreate himself on the basis of morality and a personal authority—that makes Baldwin invaluable for the American future. To celebrate him as a revolutionary Black man calls for a reckoning with the assumptions and attitudes that white Americans have conveniently hidden behind for so long. This of course, the ruling

The Memphis sanitation workers' strike, 1968. Photo by Richard L. Copley.

elite is not prepared to do.

Secondly, queering Baldwin is an attempt to create a false equivalence between Black suffering and queerness, and establish "queer resistance" as the logical successor of the Civil Rights Movement. There can be no equivalence—actual or moral—between the queer movement and the Black Freedom Movement. Queerness as a political movement derives its legitimacy from postmodern theory and its emphasis on the individual identity as the mediator of Truth, and the basis for all human social relationships. It aspires to a narrow bourgeois freedom for the individual to be accepted within society, but is unconcerned with the revolutionary emancipation of the people: freedom from poverty, indignity, and injustice. Ultimately, this is a default to Locke, and the supremacy of the individual over the human.

In an interview with Richard Goldstein, Baldwin argues, "The sexual question comes after the question of color… I think white gay people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe." This stark inequality in the expectations of Black and white people from American society helps contextualize queerness within a white supremacist social system. The ideological framework of the queer movement embodies whiteness in its abdication of the moral responsibility to transform society, choosing instead to reach for decadence and personal safety within the confines of an unjust order. In a social system that protects whiteness, queerness is therefore a protected political identity.

Baldwin saw gender and sexual identity as part of the complexity of the universal human condition, but never as overdetermining the basis of human relationships. Sexual preference and love are not synonymous, and "only by becoming inhuman can the human being pretend that [sexuality and love] are." Consider *Giovanni's Room,* misrepresented in liberal discourse as a queer romance, and used among other arguments to justify the characterization of Baldwin as a queer author. Baldwin made it clear that *Giovanni's Room* was not about homosexuality at all, but about what happens to someone if they cannot love anybody—man or woman. The inability to love makes one dangerous, because "you have no way of learning humility, no way of learning that other people suffer, and no way of learning how to use your suffering and theirs to get from one place to another."

Love, for Baldwin, is the richest expression of the human striving to be fully human. Even romantic or sexual love for him is an opening—"a bondage which liberates you into something of the glory and suffering of the world." He gave voice to the deepest implications of Black suffering, but also to the great capacity for beauty and love that came from the same source. Love was not a wish but a necessity for Black folk, to reclaim their humanity in the face of cruelty, and to strengthen the children against a loveless world that would attempt to destroy them. Baldwin says to his nephew, "if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children."

In contrast, Baldwin saw whiteness as an anti-love and anti-human impulse—predicated as it is on the creation and then the subjugation of an inferior "other"—and therefore a moral choice that no American is compelled to make. By choosing whiteness, the white individual cuts himself off from broader humanity, and thereby surrenders his capacity to love and to achieve his own human possibilities. Baldwin believed that by choosing to exalt whiteness at the expense of the human being, American society had become profoundly loveless. Reflecting on the growing obsession with sexual identity in his time, Baldwin writes, "I am not certain, therefore, that the present sexual revolution is either sexual or a revolution. It strikes me as a reaction to the spiritual famine of American life."

The highest stage of love for Baldwin is revolutionary love for humanity, which allows you to see yourself in another person and recognize that justice and freedom for one cannot be achieved without justice and freedom for all. In its heroic struggle to transform America, the Black Freedom Movement's moral anchor was revolutionary love. Martin Luther King Jr., the great leader of the Third American Revolution, saw nonviolence as the truest expression of God's love for all his children. For him, as for Baldwin, revolutionary love was the only antidote to the hate and division codified by a white supremacist social system destroying the humanity of Black and white folk alike.

THE LAST WHITE NATION AND ACHIEVING OUR NATION

Baldwin is not the voice of queer resistance, he is a revolutionary Black man with a message for our times. The postmodern capture of Baldwin by the queer movement is an insult to his deep and uncompromising commitment to the project of Black freedom, and to the revolutionary remaking of the American people. Equally unconscionable is the attempt to narrow his broad and liberatory vision of love into a narcissistic endeavor mediated by individual identity. These ideological positions must be recognized for what they are—an attack on the consciousness and revolutionary capacity of the people. The revolutionary James Baldwin must be excavated from the narrative hegemony of the ruling elite and restored to his rightful place in the struggle for human freedom.

The Black Freedom Movement fought, not just for equal citizenship and voting rights for Black people, but to radically transform American society by removing the basis of historic injustices against Black people, which is the myth of white supremacy. It saw itself as part of the world anti-colonial and peace movements—an articulation of dark humanity's rejection of the values and standards of a white supremacist world order. King's calls for a revolution of values is the call for the American people to break the cycle of the triple evils of racism, poverty, and war.

Baldwin helps us see that the future of the American revolutionary process lies in taking up the unfinished project of the Black Freedom movement. This calls for the undoing of ideas and values which reproduce whiteness and mediate human social relationships in America, i.e. the white supremacist social system. Baldwin asserts that white people, such as Buckley, who believed they were freed by liberal democracy, are prisoners in a house of bondage of their own making. They will remain unfree until they recognize that their freedom and future are intertwined with the freedom of Black folk and darker peoples of the world.

The Democratic Party claims to be the party of Black people and inheritor of the Black Freedom Movement, but defends the same unjust system and assumptions that the Black Freedom Struggle showed were bankrupt. The Democratic Party promises to protect one's reproductive rights, the freedom "to love who you love," freedom from fascism, all the while sending 2,000 pound bombs to Israel to murder Palestinian mothers and children. To immigrants, and a section of the Black middle and upper-middle class, it offers a seat at the welcome table with the ruling elite, on the condition of assimilating into and apologizing for the white supremacist social system. This requires them to turn their eyes away from the genocide in Gaza and from the long, continuing genocide of Black people at home, one child at a time.

Social democrats like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain only go as far as proposing reforms within the white supremacist social system—to better hide its actual aims and ideologies—but never a revolutionary and epistemic break from it. Hence, their unconditional endorsement of the Democratic Party.

Freedom and Democracy have for too long been treated as mere talking points by the ruling elite of this country. Baldwin makes clear the revolutionary role of Black folk—especially the Black poor: not simply as an identity category to be pandered to by liberals and politicians, but as a world historic people who have been at the vanguard of colored modernity and the struggle against white supremacy. He presents all Americans, white Americans in particular, with the moral choice to reject whiteness in favor of a personal, human authority that reconnects them to their Black brothers and sisters, and, through them, to the world's dark billions. Baldwin says this moral choice is the revolutionary choice. Finally, he leads us to locate the revolutionary task of our time as the struggle to make America the last white country—a condition to achieve a new civilization, a new political system, and a new economic system—and produce a new American People in the process.

The Gate (for James Baldwin)

BY JEREMIAH KIM

There is a gate at the end of the world
and it is the mouth of a burning paradise

There is a charming flower that drinks
from the neck of the land it bleeds;
and stares with hatred at the desert rain

There is a shining city of ten-thousand stories
and each floor writhes in standstill,
sinking beneath the sunset glass
(time's vengeance is a swift horizon);
while the citizens below, like shells
crash to dust against the pounding waves:
scattered, diffusing less than light, alone in separate agony

And *somewhere*, *somehow*
at the end of all this…

There is a people of darker veins who erupt:
who rebel as an earthquake does, setting fire and flood
to the garden of earthly delights
that would descend upon them as a mass grave;
and so: turn the liar's siege upon himself

There is a nation that stands for all nations,
all religions, all visions;
all freedom struggles, all metaphors;
all parchment scars and all futures;
and it is a Black nation
written with stolen breaths from the American sun

There is a door that each of us must enter
(*today in Gaza — and tomorrow…?*)
and the price of its ticket is death:
death of the false self,
death of the false prophets,
death of the soothing lie told to get by,
death of the blindness that governs a nation's fate,
death of the coward's silence that blinks away
the blood of martyrs like so much dirt from your eyes

There is a child there too, with mangled limbs
and a soft expression, even in death:
and you will not look away

There is a river at the end of this world
and the beginning of a new one:
birthed from the blood of these martyrs
under a sparrow's clear sky

There is a memory of a river with a green stem
and on the banks, a boy lies weeping;
a universe murdered;
and the song that enters him
is the one he will hold like a knife,
tenderly, like love: forever

There is a gate in the trampled heart
of every city: whose road leads back
to a mountain burning in our midst;
and the mountain,
whose eyes are the electric moon /
whose crown seizes like thunder /
whose voice is an unspent flame,
asks, by its very existence,
the only question there is:

What price your life, and
what price the child's?
What price peace, and
what price freedom?

College students join hands in Oxford, Ohio in during the 1964 Summer of Fredoom Bus Riders, singing "We Shall Overcome.". Photo by Steve Schapiro.

We Can't Go Back: A Baldwinian Assessment of the Student Encampments

BY NURI YI

When the students at the University of Pennsylvania suddenly broke off from the crowd and ran towards the lawn of College Green, jumping onto the roped off area of thin sprouting grass, the dam burst and something snapped. What had been simply the latest in an unvarying sequence of protests, marches, and rallies abruptly transformed.

In those first moments, a rush of people followed to flood onto the grass: for every student who set up a tent, twenty more coursed to stand around them, forming a large ring around the perimeter. Most of us were strangers, unacquainted, but we instinctively locked arms and elbows, standing straight and solid to protect the encampment from police and counter-protestors. We held on tightly to each other: some students faced outwards determinedly, while others faced inwards, watching the tents go up.

The students' faces were shockingly open and earnest. Looking at them, they felt both familiar and unfamiliar: some undergraduates and graduate students I recognized from classes, teaching—and yet they were imbued with a new character, which was suddenly beautiful. Rather than the usual inscrutable wariness or the sense of something hiding—or being hidden, left protected—behind the outward appearance, *everything was out*. Conviction—fear and awareness of risk—courage despite—and above all, faith, made serious and dignified.

Penn's campus is always lively, and yet despite being so filled with activity, so often the university can feel superficial and cold. Something remains closed off: certainly to onlookers without, but also for those within, who ought to and must belong. We walk briskly, coming and going, caught up in aggrandized expectations and grinding away at ourselves in the pursuit of success. We become depersonalized: the inner human being becomes suspended, dubious, and the spirit becomes subdued and dejected.

The encampments ruptured this hard, indifferent veneer of the elite university. Ultimately, it was brittle and weak, readily giving way for a new human quality to be brought forward into the open. For hours we stood together, present, sharing our hopes and coming to know each other on this new, dedicated ground. People walked by, took photos of the spectacle, occasionally jeered and prowled, but often expressed their support, relief, and even gratitude. As people left for dinner or evening classes or as the light faded,

others took their place, ensuring the circle continued unbroken.

Something was cracking in us. Unbeknownst to the comfortable, who hoped the tension would not break and their power could hold, the students moved. Their consciousness stirred; they joined together quickly and quietly. Columbia was no anomaly. It embodied a new spirit of defiance, confidence, and courage which swept the country.

The student protests were able to reestablish a moral center desperately needed in American society. By recovering a sense of humanity from the ruling paradigm of extreme, isolating individualism—and placing it back in its place as the guiding star—the encampments cracked open a path back to reality, creating openness to change and unleashing a deep but untapped capacity for moral clarity, courage, and struggle.

What initially felt like such a breakthrough, however, was crushed and disappointed. Universities refused to divest or disclose, with utter contempt for democratic governance and popular will. If anything, their desperation made them draconian, punishing the students so the genocide could continue more smoothly. The campuses today feel repressive and actively hostile, locked and barricaded against any expression of dissent or even of mourning. Things are constantly tense, with deep distrust across the moral lines which have been drawn. Any facade of normality is built on delusion or denial. For men, women, and children are still being murdered daily; starved, bombed, trapped in the rubble, and engulfed in flames.

And yet, such deep-lying human qualities—morality, vitality, resolve—are our greatest strength in political struggle, and remain so despite setbacks or unachieved objectives. The student encampments of the spring are a key to understanding the price we must pay—to salvage any possible future for Americans in this world that we have created. Even now, unanswered questions linger and nobody can yet see the end in sight: *Where did it take us and leave us? How do we confront our shattered dream to complete what was started with such conviction?*

I want to assess the student movement through the revolutionary and prophetic essayist James Baldwin, who best illuminates where this energy can go. In *No Name in the Street*, he writes:

> "Power, then, which can have no morality in itself, is yet dependent on **human energy**, on the wills and desires of human beings. When power translates itself into tyranny, it means that the principles on which that power depended, and which were its justification, are bankrupt… But for power truly to feel itself menaced, it must somehow sense itself in the presence of another power—or, more accurately, an energy—which it has not known how to define and therefore does not really know how to control."

THE MORAL CHOICE AND THE REVOLUTIONARY IMPERATIVE

The American student movement—and the students themselves—now faces great obstacles and challenges. **But if the students accept the moral imperative of this time, they will find the revolutionary imperative again.** In an age of "complicated" issues that relishes a utilitarian calculus of moral grayness, reviving morality as a real and open question—to force an actual encounter with the living soul, without deferring to any external authority—is a powerful act. It compels you to make decisions as a man or woman, as a human being: limited in the power to enforce your personal will, yes, but still *having* the necessary responsibility to internally grapple, to choose, and finally, to fight your battles.

The moral imperative means that before asking, *Is it too hard?* or *Is it too radical?* or *Is the price too high?* we ask ourselves, *Is it right?* And what is right cannot be too radical or too difficult or too personally costly, reshaping the limits of what we consider possible and expanding our capacities. During the encampments, this moral capacity was allowed to live and breathe within daily life as the foundation for social and political change. In risking ourselves and struggling for freedom, we grew closer to achieving our own moral authority.

Our moral standards were raised by the example of a truer, tested morality from a people halfway around the globe. Baldwin described the realization of the oppressed: "They do not know the precise shape of the future, but they know that the future belongs to them. They realize this paradoxically—by the failure of the moral energy of their oppressors and begin, almost instinctively, to forge a new morality, to create the principles on which a new world will be built." The Palestinian freedom struggle embodies this new moral energy. Abubaker Abed, a reporter in Gaza, writes, "Our lives were stolen, but our souls remain beautiful. We smile when we see someone, somewhere, anywhere, raise the flag of Palestine in a street or in a football stadium, or a mother putting keffiyehs around her children's necks and people talking about us as if they are part of us… This is the reality the entire world needs to know."

Morality is made concrete by the exemplar of those who love their children, their people, and the land too much to give up on struggle. The Gazan infant and child in the camp, the *shaheed* covered in dust and ash, the mother on the road and in the market, the father grieving, holding his family, the rare elders whose dignity and authority cannot be shaken, and those who still pray amidst the ruins of their churches and mosques: these are a people who have reached an advanced stage in their social relations. And the Palestinian people, in their martyrdom and unyielding, steadfast belief, reflect something back to us—the requirement of faith in our own humanity, linked to theirs.

While the genocide has exposed the bankruptcy of Western "values" once and for all, the Palestinian people are a testament to the fact that morality is a real force, with power to match and even prevail over any material disadvantage. After 70 years of occupation and over a year of intended death by fire, shrapnel, starvation, and disease, the people of Gaza have not bowed or bent; their souls remain beautiful. Despite Israel's assumptions and hoped-for plans of destruction, the Palestinian people refuse to turn on each other. Each citizen of Gaza who refuses to be cowed, who is forced to accept death but refuses to die for nothing, is neither a terrorist nor an object victim for charity, but a human being with a backbone who has achieved a consciousness that bends the material world around them. Such human consciousness is the defining force of history.

Moral consciousness broadens the possibilities of *political* capacity. The individual transcends their singular limitations and joins a beloved community; the more one is willing to bear and to sacrifice, the deeper the scope and the wider the horizons of human action. In coming into one's full agency, one navigates great complexity to defy both expectation and probability. The fight for freedom, whether in Palestine or America, furnishes a moral center, a creative optimism, and a sense of the human being that endures and also opens up the future.

The encampments manifested and defined that yearning for a moral center. In this American society which is so cold and distrusting, the encampments brought into being the crucial sense of community, buttressed by freedom from fear—or a need for freedom greater than fear. The stakes of life or death overshadowed the desire for privilege and safety, illuminating a new energy and conviction to truly *live*.

These students are the descendants of the Civil Rights Movement, though they may not know it. In substance, they bear the most potential resemblance to the young Black and white Freedom Riders who went South and participated in the Freedom Summer. As they seek their political maturity and the key to their own identity, they have experimented with and tried on the various mantles of the legacies that have been offered them—the New Left, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, the anti-apartheid movement, the Occupy movement, and Black Lives Matter, to name a few. But when put to the test across the country, it is the Black Freedom Tradition that the students instinctively turn to as their greatest inheritance, singing songs like "We Shall Not Be Moved" and holding onto each other for spiritual strength.

Such moral and political consciousness is a *revolutionary* consciousness, through which a new sense of self and a new identity can be achieved. In choosing to live by the moral standards proven by the people of Palestine—what their experience tells us about life—we rediscover the standards and principles of our own revolutionary inheritance.

STUDENTS, MOVEMENTS PAST, AND THE UNIVERSITY TODAY

The students are being tested by the same moral choice laid before the American people generations ago, which is a choice larger than that of determining tactics or strategy. Baldwin described the inner turmoil which besets today's students—a choice between the assurance of safety in a white supremacist system or the dangers of struggle:

> "Their moral obligations to the darker brother, if they were real, and if they were really to be acted on, placed them in conflict with all that they had loved and all that had given them an identity, rendered their present uncertain and their future still more so, and even jeopardized their means of staying alive."

The ruling class is determined to make it as difficult as possible for the students to make this choice and to form a new identity in the process. It is why they have so viciously attacked the encampments, from the countless distorting and denunciatory statements by so-called authority figures, to the mass arrests and razing of the encampments, and now in the continuing and blatant censorship and intimidation of students. They encourage the students to doubt and fear, to try to forget, and to turn their back on humanity by abandoning the commitments they made in the spring. Although the university betrayed them, the students are offered retreat back into the university's chilling, empty safety. There, cowardice, complacency, and self-centeredness will be handsomely rewarded; courage and the moral choice will wither on the vine.

What has been made apparent to the students is that even elite education does not grant freedom or enlightenment. They are being prepared to join a ruling class in symbiosis with war, which is impossibly broad in function: from the planning and funding of war, its defense in the media, its building of logistics and technological infrastructure, to its justification through the production of expert knowledge. All of their youthful vitality, their grand education, and even the purpose they seek, are to be channeled into conformity with the values of the State Department.

The university is but another apparatus of the state. And if the students refuse to play their allotted role in genocide—whether in silent complicity or with enthusiastic support—then they are worthless and to be discarded. Baldwin, describing rebellious

college students during the Vietnam War era, wrote, "they had not realized how cheaply, after all, the rulers of the republic held their white lives to be… They were privileged and secure only so long as they did, in effect, what they were told: but they had been raised to believe that they were free."

He saw then, though, that many were still "deeply corrupted…by the doctrine of white supremacy in many unconscious ways," and "were far from judging or repudiating the American state as oppressive or immoral—they were merely profoundly uneasy." Indeed, the white anti-war movement took on momentum and prominence with the protest of the draft; and while Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the New Left drew from the energies of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, they remained distinct and even at a distance. A color line existed amongst those who were for peace: those who looked to Noam Chomsky and Jane Fonda occupied a different lifeworld from Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali.

The anti-Vietnam War student protests are often invoked as an easy comparison to this past spring, but in many ways, the students today are willing to go further than the "flower child" generation of the 1960s that Baldwin witnessed. In the spring of 2024, many students made a leap. Some went for broke. They did this not for themselves, to avoid being drafted into a war, but because they were strongly driven by a moral imperative. As they looked on a genocide, widely condemned by the world, they had to question the moral health and political future of a state which continues to fund 70 percent of Israel's war effort. They had to act.

These students rebelled against the standards of the elite university, which upholds whiteness—not as a racial category, but as an ideological invention dissociating a select few from the general, universal human condition. Students rejected the assumption that they uniquely deserved protection, refusing any distinction between themselves and the Palestinian people. Indeed, they profoundly identified with them, declaring their fates were linked. They face, on the whole, more severe consequences: suspensions, expulsion, eviction, blacklisting from jobs, and even deportation. But they say in response that no price or pain inflicted on them by the ruling class can compare to the suffering of the people of Gaza.

THE POSSIBILITIES FOR THE PALESTINE MOVEMENT AND THE AMERICAN FUTURE

Today, the Palestine solidarity movement faces a crossroads. For years, the oppression of Palestinians by Israeli occupation lingered on the fringes of general consciousness. The past year has marked a watershed, with public conscience becoming awakened and opinion passionately shifting against Israel in favor of a real ceasefire, peace, and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

But such developments have been marked by the ruling class's suppression and hostility the whole way—what has been called a "Palestine exception" of unequal treatment. The students especially have been

Palestinian children hold signs thanking the American pro-Palestine student protests at a rally in Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, May 1, 2024.

disparaged and belittled, and their ultimate goals and intent have been distorted. The ruling elite fearmonger in an attempt to narrow the possibilities for struggle and isolate the students and the movement.

Almost every other "progressive" cause for social change in the last decades became absorbed into the Democratic Party as it reached critical mass. Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ movement, feminism, the climate crisis, and even socialism were appropriated by Democratic campaigns. The Party, as an establishment, swallows up progressive causes—and dictates what counts as "progressive"—to bolster its image. Amongst prominent Democrats, there are shockingly few sincere champions of these causes in practice. The ruling principle is a calculated strategy to leverage a veneer of cultural progressivism against the apparently backward Republican Party. For instance, the George Floyd protests won Joe Biden the presidency in 2020; for the 2024 election, abortion rights were substituted as the main cause—a strategy that has now failed.

Unlike other movements that the Democrats have taken up for political advancement, Palestine cannot be satisfied by rhetorical inclusion. Palestine and Gaza ask fundamental questions of war and peace, with a concrete demand that must be answered in deeds, not in words.

The Democratic Party's inability and refusal to reexamine its symbiotic ties with Israel—even as it commits crimes against humanity and destroys its legitimacy in the eyes of the world and its own base—reveals the Party's most uncompromisable interests and ideology. These interests have been hitherto obscured by a performative, weaponized dedication to general human welfare. But it is becoming evident that the greatest interest of the Democratic Party is an increasingly naked and existential commitment to war.

In the spring, there were tens of thousands of students who were passionate, willing to sacrifice. Each of them also made a commitment: every student who was serious then about ending the genocide knows they cannot easily abandon their moral principles. They must now grapple with their long-held assumptions and with their own inner conflict—what to do, how to do it, and where to place their faith so as to succeed? But regardless of their inner feelings at any stage, the students' task—their raison d'être—is to end the genocide. This will define their ultimate success or failure, and their next steps.

Their two main options are either to be *narrowed*, or to *broaden*.

In the former, the Palestine movement can allow itself to be pushed back to the margins of society, dissipating on the mass front into a toothless cultural liberalism. The ruling class's siege on the most committed, radical students is meant to isolate them from their mass base and turn them away from democratic struggle. This alienation is the desired outcome of the ruling elite: the extreme and adventurist Weather Underground went this route, splintering off from the fading SDS; neither resulted in meaningful success. The present-day Palestine movement has been touched by strains of anarchism, ultra-leftism, and experiments with guerrilla tactics; but on a general level almost everybody carries the woke ideological baggage of the last decade, making them vulnerable to virtue signaling and regression towards empty moralizing.

If the student movement becomes totally cynical about America—viewing it as a settler colony identical to Israel and bombastically advocating for its dissolution—the movement will flatten the complexity of the political landscape and condemn itself to the fate of nihilism: stagnant, pessimistic, with no political horizon or vision of the future. But as long as there is any love in the movement—love of Palestine, love of humanity—the students will be driven, with good faith, to find a path that can lead to freedom.

A broad peace movement presents a larger and more durable alternative. The encampments demonstrated the presence of both hunger and energy in American society for new political expression and new ways of relating to one another—a movement **to unify and develop the wide-ranging and growing anti-war sentiments of the American people in a principled manner**. With this recognition we are drawn closer to the Black Freedom Movement, which broke the stranglehold of assumptions governing the human being's relationship to society; and reshaped this relationship on freer, more just terms of positive peace. We are compelled to know the Black proletariat, whose consciousness forged the American revolutionary process. Students have clearly displayed an interest in reaching out to the broader community; and while divestment campaigns remain important, the most revolutionary thing the students can do is try to find the people.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin was driven by a powerful belief in the capacity of the American people. He proclaimed: "We are here to begin to achieve the American Revolution. It is time that we the people took the government and the country into our own hands. It is perfectly possible to tap the energy of this country. There is a vast amount of energy here, and we can change and save ourselves."

We must do the same and urgently reach a higher stage to fulfill our commitments. To do so, we will have to understand ourselves, and love the people of this nation, discovering a new identity in the struggle for a new society. It will require creative experimentation, discipline, and steadfastness to define us. A long road lies ahead, with difficult choices for people to make—but in the end, we cannot evade these choices without evading life itself.

The Struggle for Black Freedom, Closer Now: Just Above My Head

BY SERAFINA HARRIS

"You have sensed my fatigue and my panic, certainly, if you have followed me until now, and you can guess how terrified I am to be approaching the end of my story. It was not meant to be my story, though it is far more my story than I would have thought, or might have wished. I have wondered, more than once, why I started it, but—I know why. It is a love song to my brother. It is an attempt to face both love and death.

"I have been very frightened, for: I have had to try to strip myself naked. One does not like what one sees then, and one is afraid of what others will see: and do. To challenge one's deepest, most nameless fears, is also, to challenge the heavens. It is to drag yourself and everyone and everything and everyone you love, to the attention of the fiercest of the gods: who may not forgive your impertinence, who may not spare you. All that I can offer in extenuation of my boldness is my love."

Excerpt from *Just Above My Head*, Book 5, "The Gates of Hell"

Just Above My Head is Baldwin's last novel. The book comes from the accumulation of Baldwin's life, the historical moment and time, choices, and world Baldwin inherited and corrected. Baldwin's life starts the same as any other Black man: from the auction block. Baldwin—in Harlem and his momma and daddy and siblings, to the library, to Paris, then to the freedom movement in the South.

When Baldwin was young he first set out to recognize what he was to do with his work. Baldwin prepares himself by writing *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. This book is Baldwin's handshake with destiny. He sees a problem of a white social system where human beings abnormally produce lovelessness, swapping human relationships for profit and moral self-control. It's Baldwin to pose the question: what happens to man if Man is not able *to* love; that's where *Giovanni's Room* comes from. As a man who cannot stay in *Another Country:* Paris, France, Baldwin writes *Giovanni's Room* to explain why he comes back to America. To step outside of the novels, a year later Baldwin wrote *The Fire Next Time*. This two-part essay tells us about what Baldwin even meant about the problem of the inability to love in *Giovanni's Room*—all this time, Baldwin has been talking about real revolution.

This is why Rufus, in *Another Country*, dies. The death of Rufus represents the nameless and daily death of all Black men in the face of white supremacy.

It is time for a new world and a new time. A revolution of values would be a complete assertion of emancipated democratic humanity. If Rufus was no longer "just another Black man," and if the modern world wasn't controlled by white supremacy, afraid of Rufus, to murder him out of existence; if there was a country where everyone knew Rufus's name, street, family as their own and realized how he grew up reflects us all and *is* us (the real world), then Rufus wouldn't have been a type of martyr. Rufus's song could be the song of the world. *Another Country* begins with that song. This song arises from the aching soul for freedom, our human responsibility based in a historic struggle to define and use love to achieve a new personality on which a new country could be made and fought for.

Then, something breaks with Martin Luther King's Assassination. Baldwin is a fighter in the heart of a Third American Revolution, and like Leo's heart attack hadn't completely killed Leo in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Martin Luther King's Assassination forced a recognition about the price for freedom, which Baldwin stared in the face with his countrymen and accepted.

So: Jesus died and Martin Luther King died "for *our* sins." But we are still on this train. Martin was a friend of all, Baldwin included. Baldwin might have wanted it to be himself that died. Maybe we all do, now. There's a reason why the State Department shot King on that Balcony. Every individual now has the moral obligation to live for Martin's death—or did he die in vain? For Baldwin, death was to come in 1987—later. There was still time left for Baldwin, and he had to use time for our advantage. There were more questions to resolve, to help us understand about ourselves and our moral responsibility to any human being at all, even if the trains were gone long before we reached the station. In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, Baldwin knows it's *white* people's hearts that need a fix, not the destination of freedom that needs changing. Baldwin writes *No Name In the Street* soon after *Train*, wherein he describes that America is heading to achieve the last white nation. Stop one: *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Fonny, in this book; his Baby is going to be had—he and Tish made that baby, Tish carried that baby, and that baby was born. This happens everyday, and we get the same chance everyday. Baldwin writes: Can we raise this child? Do we love this child enough?

In his journey through life and time, Baldwin found himself, he found the revolutionary struggle that *is* America, and he located what Black people must do for that kid.

Up above my head (up above my head)
I hear music in the air (I hear music in the air)
Up above my head (up above my head)
I hear music in the air (I hear music in the air)
I really do believe (I really do believe)
There's a Heaven up there.

Romare Bearden, Sketch of James Baldwin in the title page of a copy of Just Above My Head, 1979.

Song is important to Black people, and the musician has a role important to Black people. Song is the basis of consciousness and a people's worldview. For example, *Rufus* from *Another Country* was a drummer. *Arthur* from *Just Above My Head* is a singer. Both, like all Black people and music, come from the church, the meeting ground. So: *Rufus* intended to play music to live. Arthur played music to live. "R&B" and "Jazz" are just labels for white people to understand something they don't, but they come from the same place. The music developed as time and struggle developed. What moves or makes music is synthesis and protraction. Music is heard when it is true. That is the pressure that concentrates Arthur, a requirement in the battle of the gods. He lives by these requirements of the song, for the people, to move and save time.

With a new song emerging, a new time emerging, *Just Above My Head* is dealing with political and social complexities that emerge from the assassination of Martin Luther King; can Black people protect the song which in it contains the striving to be free? Baldwin explains what has been produced through this struggle; the reality of a Black social system, and explains on what basis does it operate, journey, for: freedom.

Just Above My Head explains the inheritance of a new century, and what we are to become because of our responsibility to it: *Young, Gifted and Black.*

Meanwhile, Baldwin had commitments to speak, for the freedom movement and after. Baldwin's work, life, and this commitment were joined—he is but one man. He, who spared nothing but to make the truth known, who called us to make love a reality and told us to learn about it, is the reason why we cannot live so simply anymore. There is no Black television, no white television, and there never really was. White actors act best when they show that they don't know, and are not the most beautiful, most intelligent people in all of civilization. The whole boy-meets-girl story is done. *Titanic* had her run but we cannot skate on thin ice anymore. It's either sink, or swim. *The Notebook* is as close to a fantasy one could get, and we don't have to go to *Disney* or *Marvel* or any of the other roundabout ways Hollywood wants to avoid this fact: time has run out, love wins or it doesn't win.

The problem of Western civilization is that it buzzes, skirmishes, and flexes its muscles around love. It has not been able to achieve beauty without Asia and Africa. Baldwin left us with this body of work for us to fight white supremacy. He helps us ask: How is it possible for love to fail? When does love ever really lose out? Why is it logical for love to be for itself and illogical for love not to?

It's not a question of whether we are here or not—the only reason why we are here asking, could we achieve our maturity, at *this late date*, is because love still has, and had, the last word.

Who knew? Who knows for sure? Where is the proof? Yes, from our fathers' fathers and their mothers that raised *them,* Baldwin let me know that I come from a long line of poets. People who take life seriously enough—to change the entire edifice of what we know of man, like Einstein, or Victor Hugo, Shakespeare, Wagner, Bach, The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Gandhi. We might want to say we are a young country, but the record dates the innocence as expired—just as soon as Plymouth Rock landed on us. We haven't got the right to lose faith in love, that's what Baldwin is fighting for us to never forget. That's why Martin Luther King died.

Baldwin's life was to become a writer, and his work was to help him become a good man—his involvement with the Black Freedom Movement was inseparable from the man that Baldwin is. Baldwin's

life is complete, and this final novel, *Just Above My Head*, is a testament of what we now call our life-line. This book was written in 1979. This book was written for us. This book was a type of parthenogenesis, from the blood of a slowing heartbeat finding the rhythm to the new. Baldwin knew the price of this book. This book is a salute to the assassination of Martin Luther King, our friend.

> "This book has been much delayed by trials, assassinations, funerals, and despair. Nor is the American crisis, which is part of the global, historical crisis, likely to resolve itself soon. An old world is dying, and a new one, kicking in the belly of its mother, time, announces that it is ready to be born. This birth will not be easy, and many of us are doomed to discover that we are exceedingly clumsy midwives. No matter, so long as we accept that our responsibility is to the newborn;the acceptance of responsibility contains the key to the necessarily evolving skill. This book is not finished—can never be finished by me. There will be bloody holding actions all over the world, for years to come: but the Western party is over, and the white man's sun has set. Period."

Excerpt from *No Name in the Street*, "Epilogue: Who Has Believed Our Report?"

Arthur in the book lives until 34 years old. He is loved by his friends, and family—Arthur has a brother Hall, who narrates the story for the most part. Arthur is on a journey to discover his song, and if used, and understood, would give his people a fighting chance at real freedom. This is a process not done by Arthur alone; at the same time, Arthur was forced to be alone because we are individuals, and this man moved through life to achieve his death. He wanted to pay his dues, *now*. This is what King set out to do, to do his work well even if his life was not long. Martin Luther King's life—his life is supposed to be fulfilled by the achievement of a new human consciousness, where freedom achieves time, and love powers the will of the soul.

Arthur's heart was broken by Crunch, way before the people who took Arthur's song or discarded him, could. Crunch was a Black man. Like many other men, Crunch was unable to love a man because of the fact that Crunch himself could not get over being a *man* in love with another man. This was the beginning of the makings of a web that trapped and ultimately killed Arthur. A broken heart is what killed Arthur. It was through Jimmy, his last love, that Arthur found Rhythm and Blues. The happiness that Arthur had with Jimmy was too late, or too soon—

> "We are left with what we don't know. It would simplify matters, perhaps if I could say that we don't know what we don't want to know: but I, we are not that simple. We know. Almost everything we do is designed to protect us from what we know: consider the uses to which we put the troublesome past tense of the verb. So if I say, I'm left with what I don't know, I could equally be saying, with tears in my eyes, I Knew! But, Lord, how I hoped I didn't know—how I hoped my hand could hold up the sky!"

—and on top of all that first hurt, Arthur had wanted to be respected by those whom *he* respected, as a singer. He was singing to the point when he didn't know why he was singing in the way that he was. The word from the audience was the last straw. Arthur was worried what others would think about him and Jimmy, overall, because the space Jimmy took up, Arthur had first prepared for Crunch. Arthur became scared of what people would think he would do to their song. Underneath: Jimmy had an argument with Arthur in Paris, and that's why Arthur left without Jimmy to London. London is where the bar Arthur died alone in was. Arthur was getting strung out because of the pressure to find a way for himself, over harder drugs than weed and alcohol; he was ashamed of Jimmy and ashamed to not just be happy with Jimmy; he didn't know how to stop singing, or if he could find his song at all and; heartbreak.

For Arthur, as it is for all men and women, this problem is finding the well in your spirit where giving has no end and rest is in eternity. This is the spirit of the land of music—where people are qualitatively different—do not starve for war and eat bread of malnutrition, but sacrifice for the infinite, and knowledge becomes a source for constant renewal. Baldwin is showing that through complexity there's an answer to completing the struggle for freedom: love.

When one can love: Something is gone, and something is had, *remains forever, and changes the air we breathe*—forever. This has less to do about loving one person, even less to do with individual romance: and, more to do with what happens when you're in and surrounded by love, and loved: for it to show what you're made of—some people have never seen it, let alone use it. To think: that this alone could be the potential of the real basis for all life and human civilization.

> "The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out."

Why is this what Baldwin has to write about?

In *Just Above My Head*, we also meet Julia. Julia's spirit is a very old, Black, African, prophetic achievement to have happened or continue to happen here in America. Isn't it something that,

Mama may have, papa may have
But God bless the Child that's got his own

Julia shows how much really has happened here, in America. The outcome of her journey is the showcase of an achievement: maturity.

Baldwin says Julia had, as a child preacher, not belonged to herself, nor had the remotest idea of who she was. It was also her and her fathers' pride and ego that took upon her in becoming a pastor, and she would have to pay for that too. What drove Julia to the Church is the same thing that drives those children who have a profound and close to perfect capability to drive a generation—but instead are caught in the crossfire and limitations of a changing moment within the standards of America. This means there is a newness in Julia, and it resolves or finds itself in a place almost deeper than love. It is love that produces this newness and also produces Julia, but there is something that also produces love, and creates love—Julia knows the depth and transformative nature of sorrow.

When it Thundered and lightnin'd and the wind began to blow
There's thousands enough of people ain't got no place to go

Julia gets impregnated twice. Once by Crunch, because Julia needed to be renewed, to be made—not by her father—but in a way, by herself. This was a choice that she made on her own. Her father beat this first child out of her and impregnated her, for the second time. Her father wanted to live off of the fat of the land, and thought Julia would be his ticket while she was a preacher. Julia really believed in God, while her father didn't believe in anything besides turning his poverty around towards the gates of heaven. Because Julia didn't want to be a liar, she was encumbered by wanting to know herself, find herself, and become her own. This thrust her forward, leaving the Church at 14 years old—even if the church, or God, or her even being a preacher wouldn't never leave her!—and when that child implanted in Julia by her Father was also beaten out of her, she was almost killed. Fact is, she did die in a way.

The battles she has faced, and the person she has come to in herself, begin to be very concretized when she reaches her 30s, when her scars begin to show. There isn't anything sad about this—meaning, Julia isn't trying to hide from anything in Julia. She, in fact, wanted to face her fears. This is where R&B arrives, to celebrate fear, love, death, and renewal for the personal and public triumph of a *made* Black man and woman—Black, on their own terms, which spells the striving to be free, and striving to create life. Those Black artists that achieve this much lead as a moral example, for us all.

Julia becomes an example of a personal triumph that comes from the bellies and bowels of the lonely: to be a determining factor upon her journey, affecting it, holding it, playing, fighting, dragging it to cross her gates.

What I'm saying about Julia is more interesting when I think that Baldwin had to write her, as well as all the others in *Just Above My Head*, in 1979. Baldwin is saying something about the *ability* to journey. More than where to go, this last novel says that there is already a destination, upon our strivings to realize our real humanity—and just as dependent on our ability to make freedom real; there *is* a destination coming, all that it depends on is if we hold onto each other.

Just Above My Head is a book for love as a revolutionary force for our times. Does Julia make it or not, does she have a "happy ending" even if she cannot have a child? Arthur's brother, Hall, wanted and was able to have children whom Julia helps raise, so there's that. And, Julia has memories. Point being, it's her access to those memories that helps her, or even Hall, to live.

Julia accessed these memories because people held on to her, and loved her.

> "'How does it feel to be back?'
>
> She pursed her lips looking very somber. 'I am glad to be back. But—that's the same question they asked me over there. And they weren't wrong.'
>
> I watched her.
>
> Again, she seemed to be staring into the bottom of a well.
>
> 'I mean, it wasn't a bullshit, my-African-sister kind of thing. The ones who came on like that just despised you, and wanted to find a way to use you. No. The question was serious. There was something true in it, though I still don't know how to put it into words. It comes out of a place, anyway, without words, somewhere where the question is the answer.'
>
> 'But I mean—we've been raised to think that a question is one thing, and the answer is another—we always say, the answer. But it may not be like that.'
>
> And I looked at her as though I were already trying to form the words in my mind, or as though I were about to say good-bye. But I had already said good-bye to Julia, and I realized, abruptly, and absolutely, that I was never going to say good-bye to her again, nor she to me. We had done that, and it hadn't been any fun at all, and we'd never, thank heaven, have to go through that again. We had accepted our terms, or perhaps, we had dictated them; it made no difference now. Too much joined us for us ever to be pulled apart: our love was here to stay.
>
> …

She looked down again. 'And—I wanted to see you—because—somehow—I feel differently. I'm not happy, but—I'm not tormented, as I was. I wanted you to know. You deserve to know. One day I will tell you other things, Oh it was a nightmare for me, I didn't know who I was. But that was very important—to know I didn't know.

'It was strange to be looked on, not merely as yourself, but as part of something other, older, vaster. I hated it. But now that I'm back here, among all these people, who think that everything begins, and ends, with them, it all begins to make: sense.' She shook her head, laughed, looked up. 'I don't know what that word 'sense' means anymore, but I'm learning to trust what I don't know.' She leaned over, surprising me, and took my hand. 'Maybe that's all I wanted to tell you. So you'd be at ease in your mind about me, and be free.'

I took her hand in both of mine. I know that we looked like lovers, and it was beautiful to realize that, in truth, at last, we were.

'Thank you for that,' I said. 'But what I'm mainly going to do with my freedom is watch over those I love.'

'That's a two-way street,' she said. She watched me for a moment. "You've been somewhere, too."

We left the place around six. I managed to find a taxi, and I put her in it, and I walked home, scarcely believing that I could be so happy, or so free. Nothing, after all, had been lost. We were going to live."

The characters are never in and of themselves. If they can achieve this curious mentality, so can we. Julia begins to access herself when she comes back to America. She comes back to America with two things. She knows more about what could be called her *role in a new time,* and she needs to assess her relationship to her *people* in America. She went to Africa to move forward. Found in Africa, as a stranger in the village, and by another stranger, she was told that sorrow is the key to joy.

Who is Arthur, really, if not the strivings of a new man in a time not ready for his personhood to pursue? What were the qualities of this man that are important—is he new because he's gay or because of the song that still is yet to be sung? These characters come from somewhere and still have yet to go. Why, and how does Baldwin write these people—what does Baldwin say about us all?

The nature of how this assessment of the journey went is reconciled by time. It is only after a period of time has passed, when it is used, that you find yourself alive, and that you can *pick up your bags and start again*, in order to live.

How could one's death allow the same person to live? What does the death of Arthur have anything to do with the journey of the characters in *Just Above My Head*?

Jimmy asks,

> "How could we sing, how could we know that the music comes from us, we build our bridge into eternity, ***we are the song we sing***?
>
> "The song does not belong to the singer. ***The singer is found by the song***. Ain't no singer, anywhere, ever made up a song—that is not possible. He hears something. I really believe, at the bottom of my balls, baby, that something hears him, something says, come here!"

Presence of mind doesn't come easy. Presence comes with moral standards, self-confidence—being able to face reality when it hits you—and faith. It comes with heart. There is no time by the sense of measurement, it—*it* being, when one is able to act accordingly, one is acted upon—is just reality. That is the access to what could be said to be the beat, rhythm, perfect timing:

> "...and you love it, and you take care of it, better than you take care of yourself, can you dig it? but you don't have no mercy on it. You can't have mercy! That sound you hear, that sound you try to pitch with the utmost precision-and did you hear me? Wow!—is the sound of millions and millions and, who knows, now, listening, where life is, where is death?"

The point of this acknowledgement is to face the fact that Martin Luther King Jr. was very real when he had felt within himself and saw in us all the ability to make a beloved community. This is to say, even if Arthur dies, it is the fact that Arthur, or Martin Luther King Jr., cannot die. They cannot die because the problems are not yet resolved. None of the characters of *Just Above My Head* can remain forever tormented by the death of Arthur. One has the moral choice, the moral obligation, to live, in order to continue up the road to a new love, to a new humanity, to our rightful claim as heirs of our own identity and of freedom. Our identity as Americans depends upon this moral choice—are we willing to see this choice as life or death?—or we cannot make it up the road. The choice or price of living, in *order to live*, is this:

> "Now, only that work which is love and that love which is work will allow one to come anywhere near obeying dictum laid down by the great Ray Charles, and tell the truth."

I want to achieve what the characters in *Just Above My Head* achieved. I do not want to be afraid, I want life to be the only possibility, in the hope that our work brings rain.