

A QUANTIFICATION OF MAGNITUDE IN THE WRITING OF JAMES

BALDWIN: A DIGITAL RECOVERY WORK

by

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to utilize a distant reading of seventeen essays written by James Baldwin alongside sustained close readings of three topics within those essays in order to understand why Baldwin has maintained increased popularity when the original historical context of the essays resulted in fame and critical acclaim, but not major literary awards. The author ran these seventeen essays through topic modeling software, and then engaged with critical and scholarly close readings to establish qualitative and quantitative explanations of patterns that exist in Baldwin's work. By connecting the findings of work under both the digital humanities as well as African American literary studies, the nature of Baldwin's essays that ascribes their popularity can clearly be understood.

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Negro writers, like James Baldwin, have repeatedly demonstrated that this conviction lends an extraordinary power to their words. There is no question that they have more to say than anybody else writing in America today. Many have read their books and heard their message, but few are prepared to understand it because they simply cannot conceive of a white man learning anything worthwhile from a Negro. Still less can they imagine that the Negro might quite possibly have a prophetic message from God to the society of our time.

--Thomas Merton, 1965¹

Introduction

James Baldwin, who died in 1987, achieved a level of celebrity that is rare among writers. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, spoke at many universities—often where his speeches received much acclaim of their own—and frequently appeared on television talk shows, all of which led to his general renown to the American public as one of the leading voices of Black America². Despite this fame and critical acclaim, Baldwin received no major literary awards and was criticized by his peer African American leaders for being too gay³, too

¹ Merton, Thomas. *Seeds of Destruction*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965.

² *Time* Magazine featured Baldwin on their cover in May 1963, and cited Baldwin as the singular writer “who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South.” See, “Nation: The Root of the Negro Problem.” *Time*. Time Inc., May 17, 1963. <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,830326,00.html>. ”

³ In an essay, Eldridge Cleaver wrote condemning Baldwin’s homosexuality. See, Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice* New York: Laurel/Dell, 1992.

liberal⁴, too critical (or too accepting) of the Black Muslim movement, and too flowery in his language⁵. This raises questions about Baldwin's legacy. Was he mostly a celebrity who rose to prominence during a time of acute racial unrest, or is he a lasting, canonical literary figure whose writings remain deeply relevant to the cause of racial justice?

By some measures, Baldwin remains an important figure in the American consciousness. Google Trends⁶ reveals that the number of times people have searched Baldwin in the last ten years has steadily been increasing, with peaks every year during February for Black History Month, with a huge increase in the months following the murders and broadcast of George Floyd and numerous others in mid-2020. Still, in my firsthand experience, it is rare that I personally meet someone who knows a single work by Baldwin, much less has read one, despite increasingly often knowing who he is. In fact, I have even had conversations with people who have claimed a specific quote from Baldwin affected them strongly, yet they had not read any of his writing. Could it be that

⁴ Conseula Francis cites multiple critics who held issue with James Baldwin's proximity to White America. See, Francis, Conseula. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"*. Rochester, New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2014. Accessed March 21, 2021. doi:10.7722/j.ctt5vj7xx.

⁵ Critic Robert A. Bone calls out Baldwin whose writing is too skilled to reveal the flaws in the content. See, Bone, Robert. *The Negro Novel in America*. [Rev. ed.]. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.

⁶ Google allows internet users to see a visualization of the trends in search terms. While Google doesn't release the actual numbers of those trends, they do scale the trends into a scale of 1-100, where 100 is the highest frequency of search within the designated amount of time. See, "James Baldwin' Interest over Time." Google Trends. Google, n.d. <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=james%20baldwin>.

Baldwin exists in that upper tier of highly regarded *but never read* authors? This might be the case for the general public, but the amount of academic criticism afforded to his writing also appears to be on the rise in terms of volume and appreciation.⁷ Increased scholarly attention might suggest that the academic world Baldwin was born into was not ready for the world that he envisioned, and as culture progressed it grew closer to the one Baldwin would have been accepted into—thus the entire literary world woke up to the relevance of Baldwin’s work. (A less flattering way to describe this scenario is that the distance in time between modern day readers and Baldwin is great enough that he is no longer seen as radical and, instead, is perceived as tamer and more palatable when compared to contemporary Black radical and anti-racist thought-leaders.) On the other hand, it could be that as later generations grew up with Baldwin as an established member of the literary canon—a body of texts in which Black writers are grossly underrepresented—his cultural importance was too great for readers to question the relevance of his writing. Baldwin remains famous among academics and non-academics alike, but a question remains that surely would have been important to Baldwin himself: is he famous in the way he would want to be famous?

⁷ Lynn Scott wrote an article for the second annual *James Baldwin Review* where she identifies the increase in criticism written regarding Baldwin for the decade. See, Scott, Lynn Orilla. "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2001–10", *James Baldwin Review* 2, 1 (2016): 168-196, accessed Mar 13, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.2.11>

Baldwin claimed dedication to what he saw as the purpose for all art—as a disturbance of the peace⁸. For Baldwin, to disturb the peace, authors reveal to their readers that their lives share commonalities with those who are suffering, even those who are from a different culture or time period or who are different from readers in terms of sexuality, wealth, politics, or ethnicity. This disturbance wakes readers up to the illusion that the status quo upholds social justice. In the case of Baldwin’s writing, he wanted to awaken white readers to the struggles of Black Americans, and he wanted to awaken Black readers to the need to actively rewrite racist structures in America. For the purposes of this project, I will use the term *magnitude* to describe the capacity of Baldwin’s work to disturb the peace.

Whereas *popularity* is easy to gauge by book sales, awards, regular claims of canonicity, or more recently in the way that the internet allows one to keep track of the number of times someone’s name has been posted online during a given time frame, *magnitude* allows us to cut through political circumstances surrounding reception and describe the nature of popularity. Establishing a way to judge magnitude can shed light on why James Baldwin is rising in popularity so

⁸ Studs Terkel interviewed Baldwin for his radio show in 1961, where Baldwin spoke heavily regarding his purpose for writing as well as many of thoughts about art as a whole. Many of the claims regarding disturbing the peace made here are based on Baldwin’s own words. See, Terkel, Studs. “James Baldwin Discusses His Book,” Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son.” The WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive. WFMT Radio Network, July 15, 1961. <https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/james-baldwin-discusses-his-book-nobody-knows-my-name-more-notes-native-son>.

long after his death, and whether this increase in popularity aligns with Baldwin's goals as an artist.

This project attempts to quantify the magnitude of Baldwin's writing, and apply it to a close reading. Traditionally, the magnitude of Baldwin's work would be measured only through the close reading and qualitative judgments of literary scholars and critics, a type of activity that remains essential in English Studies. A primary shortcoming of traditional literary scholarship, however, is that sample sizes must necessarily remain small. In order to complement previous close readings of Baldwin's work, the current project performs a type of distant reading⁹ *in order to* examine more texts and text samples than would be possible through only close reading.

Qualitative Judgments of Baldwin's Legacy

To discuss the critical and scholarly opinion of Baldwin's legacy, we draw inspiration from the full-page paid advertisement in January 19, 1988's *New York Times*: "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison,"¹⁰ where over forty artists—some who had acclaim already, and some who became more prominent during the explosion of African American literature in the 1990s—promote the recognition

⁹ Franco Moretti introduced the concept of distant reading purely as an overview of the way digital humanists use computers to analyze text. See, Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.

¹⁰ Jordan, June, Houston A Baker, Jr., et. al. "BLACK WRITERS IN PRAISE OF TONI MORRISON." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 24 Jan. 1988, www.nytimes.com/1988/01/24/books/1-black-writers-in-praise-of-toni-morrison-293988.html.

of Toni Morrison to the White critics in charge of the major literary awards. To these Black artists, Baldwin's recognition as an author, or lack thereof, following his death in December 1987 caused them to question if any other African American author would be recognized no matter how successful they were. They claimed that if an artist of Baldwin's stature could receive worldwide celebrity status but did not receive any of the traditionally associated qualitative and highly coveted literary awards, then it was likely that the insult would be so laid upon more Black artists regardless of the exemplary work they provide. By situating Baldwin as the impetus of their statement before listing Toni Morrison's qualities as an author, Baldwin's caliber is immediately counterposed with Morrison's as comparable. Morrison, it is worth noting, went on to win the Pulitzer immediately after this advertisement was posted, and later the Nobel Prize in Literature. Of course, the position of those Black artists is still held by many who believe that Baldwin was underrecognized for his impact by the world, despite his overwhelming popularity.

Baldwin's importance as a writer is inexorably linked to the balancing act Baldwin played between each of the rising schools of thought that flowered in the 1950s and 60s in regard to what was then named "the Negro problem," and the larger discussion of Black liberation as a whole. He was tied both to the humanistic school of thought populated by Western liberals as well as to the following movement of Black nationalists. Will Walker highlights Baldwin's

nuanced point between the two camps in his essay for Eddie Glaude's *Is It Nation Time?* Baldwin's complex writing focuses made it so that he was important to both camps, and yet held at arm's length in suspicious distrust because of the points where he diverged. Walker writes:

The hybrid narrative of [Baldwin's] prophetic critique, which is the product of this strange coupling of negation and affirmation, of criticism and hope, also makes Baldwin one of the most complex social critics of the 1960s. Baldwin's critical repertoire was not ordered by the well-worn jeremiadic dialectic of a discrepancy between American liberal principles of the nation's founding and American practices, but was articulated in terms of a continued national captivity to racist practices and American achievement, the aspiration for an *other* America, another country.¹¹ (emphasis in the original)

Walker pointedly identifies the techniques and the content of Baldwin's argumentation that made him as singular in the past as he is in the present. This characterization of Baldwin lends itself both to criticism and defense of his

¹¹ Will Walker, "After The Fire Next Time: James Baldwin's Postconsensus Double Bind," in *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 215-233.

magnitude, depending on which of Baldwin's texts readers focus on and the values of readers themselves.

The complexity of Baldwin's character and writing was such that while in the peak of his celebrity following the release of *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, perhaps not-so-coincidentally coupled with the advancing Civil Rights Movement, critics and Black leaders struggled to reconcile Baldwin's fame with their perception of his merit, seeking often to answer the question of whether or not Baldwin deserved the attention he was receiving. Conseula Francis, in her book *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010: An Honest Man and a Good Writer*, addresses this debate and tries to explain the reasoning behind Baldwin's harshest critics: "That one mind can give rise, in [*The Fire Next Time*], to both these essays, suggests... that Baldwin is more complicated and more insightful than he is given credit for by whites (who view him as a black redeemer), Negro intellectuals (who view him as a traitor to the cause of integration), or black nationalists (who see Baldwin as counterrevolutionary)."¹² Baldwin's nuanced writing led critics to attempt to place a metaphorical asterisk on his career: that even at the height of his celebrity in the United States, there were many camps with whom his ideas were not well-received.

¹² Francis, Conseula. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin: 1963-2010*

But Baldwin's work persisted, as did his heights of fame. The original publication of "Letter from a Region in My Mind" was so popular and wide-sweeping that according to Carol Polsgrove in *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and The Civil Rights Movement*, "readers were being told that demand for reprints of the article had exhausted the supply."¹³ Baldwin's reception following *Fire* was not only that those who read *The New Yorker* were fascinated. Rather, Baldwin had begun to feature prominently on television shows and travel the country giving lectures in town halls and churches with the Congress of Racial Equality. According to his biographer David Leeming, Baldwin had become to this point "an internationally recognized writer."¹⁴ The steep turn in Baldwin's career after *Fire* was such that to those who claim that Baldwin's later writing lacked the sting or the talent of his earlier writing, and there are many who are in that camp, 1962 is often the point at which they chart the beginning of his eventual decline into a place where he was no longer featured in every magazine, radio show, or television program. Since then, however, there has been a growing appreciation for all of Baldwin's writing, including that of his later fiction and essays.

In an article for the second volume of *James Baldwin Review*, Lynn Orilla Scott catches scholars up with how the world has been dealing with the legacy of

¹³ Polsgrove, Carol. "And Then Came Baldwin." Essay. In *Divided Minds: Intellectuals and the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Norton & Company, 2001.

¹⁴ Leeming, David. *James Baldwin: a Biography*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.

James Baldwin from the beginning of the new millennium and through the next decade. This bibliographic piece, which pulls in and gives a brief explanation of major texts and essays that were published during that time frame, brings to light that Baldwin's popularity as an author is only growing. In fact, Scott shows by pointing to authors such as Lawrie Balfour and Bill Lyne, as well as to her own book on Baldwin's later fiction, that there is a dominant trend in recent Baldwin criticism that rejects the narrative that Baldwin's career and his writing declined and instead was situated between the worlds of the Civil Rights Movement and its positive reception by the white liberal establishment, and the Black power movement which was too radical for his widespread acceptance by the country.¹⁵ No matter the reason for this change in Baldwin's historical acceptance, the fact is that many books and essays have been written recently that are still engaging with the conversation surrounding it. Through each of the successive articles in *James Baldwin Review* that anthologize Baldwin criticism, a pattern continues of Baldwin's writing becoming more popular, of conferences becoming more frequent, of the reception improving and strengthening both by the world of scholarly writing as well as the general public, and of the facets of Baldwin scholarship widening and then turning in new directions. Simply, Baldwin's legacy is trending upward at steeper and steeper inclines.

¹⁵ Scott, Lynn Orilla. "Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2001–10"

It could be that changes in Baldwin's reputation were the result of the public's original understanding of Baldwin's politics, and that their haste to categorize his beliefs and place him into specific camps meant that they were drastically unprepared for Baldwin's frequent deviation from their preconceptions. His politics certainly weren't consistently aligned with all of the various roles assigned to Baldwin. People claimed that he was a prophet, yet they were uncomfortable around his sexuality and because of this he earned the nickname Martin Luther Queen. *Fire* brought him enormous celebrity as a spokesman for the black community, but it also meant that many people thought that he was against all Western civilization in a time period that was immediately preceded by the Cuban Missile Crisis. He was sent to Europe to write reports on the conferences regarding the freedom of Africa, and the work he sent back was the essay "Princes and Powers" which neglected to provide a neat and clear thesis statement but was rather a piece of journalistic integrity that documents what happened and who disagreed with whom. Erica R. Edwards wrote of the complicated role Baldwin played in her essay "Baldwin and Black Leadership," and the way Baldwin centered black prophets in much of his writing as existing in the pivotal place between two vastly different states: "of the political (the intimate and the public), two registers of political sentiment (hope and shame), and two sites of political production (the political event and the cultural artifact sent to the

marketplace).”¹⁶ Because of Baldwin’s role as an author and a leader during the 1960s, he was in the unique position of heralding the depth of the things that he witnessed to his readership as well as interacting with those other leaders, all of whom lost their lives prematurely, and then reckoning with those deaths while intently focusing on the progress that still must be made. The dichotomy of Baldwin’s role in the height of his career and the complexity of his own character lent itself as challenge that would not be tackled until that steady trending upward reception of his writing in the last twenty years.

In fact, in 2014, Fredrick Harris wrote tackling that dichotomy for the Hutchins Center for African American Research at Harvard University an article titled “James Baldwin, 1963, and the House that Race Built.” In this essay, Harris counterposes Baldwin as the odd man out against the familiar binary of King versus Malcolm X, warring each other for the soul of the nation and the direction of their love. Harris draws an important point in his essay that is worthwhile to focus on in establishing the scholarly context for the treatment of Baldwin’s legacy:

The capacity to love runs up against a social structure built on deception, strife, and the privilege of the powerful over the other.

It’s this tension—love in the face of deception, strife, and

¹⁶ Edwards, Erica R. “Baldwin and Black Leadership.” Essay. In *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*, edited by Michelle Elam. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

privilege—that leads Baldwin to ask in *The Fire Next Time*, “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?” In 1963, King’s command to love thy enemy cannot foresee the burning house, but Malcolm does, although not for the same reason as Baldwin. Even when Malcolm declared that blacks should love themselves, he clings to an ideology of hatred for the other, whereas Baldwin’s love requires “the transcendence of the realities of color, of nation, and of altars”—an edict with which neither King nor Malcolm X were willing to comply, at least not at that moment. For Baldwin, this transcendence would make black people less like strangers in their own house, but it is a transcendence, I would argue, that would have to be accompanied by the radical restructuring of—or perhaps the destruction of—the rudiments that have kept the house fortified for centuries.¹⁷

What Baldwin centered as his position in the case of how to love in America, it wasn’t as simple as an agape love that forgave the sins of the white Americans, or the lack of love among the black people that led to misdirected violence, but the love that was extended by all of the conscious Americans to rise up and radically alter the structure and form of America to end the racial problem entirely. This

¹⁷ Harris, Fredrick. "James Baldwin, 1963, and the House that Race Built." *Transition (Kampala, Uganda)* no. 115 (2014): 52-67.

was a tough pill to swallow then, as it is now, and this mischaracterizing of Baldwin in one camp until so-and-so happening and then shifting to another camp to appeal more to so-and-so audience completely misses the point that what Baldwin was writing about required the deepest pessimism to acknowledge the flaws in the structure of America, and the deepest optimism to draw others toward the hope of repair.

Digital Humanities Work on Baldwin

The interpretation of Baldwin continues into the sphere of digital humanities, but just barely. This new methodology in literary studies encompasses the breadth of everything that computational power adds to the realm of analyzing literature, such as the archiving, manipulating, data-mining, and overall use of technology in the study of anything, with many different categorical differences in the implementations of it across various fields. Because digital humanities refers to all methods of utilizing computer based interaction with texts as well as to the community that fills the world of digital humanities and the way they interact with each other and each other's works to create a web of effort that is as infinitely fractalized as it is unprecedented, and because it is so recent, there has yet to be a generally agreed upon definition of what is ultimately in its nascent era. Part of Baldwin's reputation is that he does not have as much scholarship period directed towards him as the other significant writers of the twentieth century—though as above, that is quickly changing.

Magdalena Zaborowska has focused on one of the ways that digital humanities is seeking to bridge its own gap in the realm of access to Baldwin's life and history. Her article "Black Matters of Value: Archiving James Baldwin's House as a Virtual Writer's Museum," follows the way that Baldwin's house, his material possessions such as the books and magazines he owned or how he decorated his home, and all documentation of his writings across many different languages as a novel way to preserve legacy as well as a way to make it accessible to a wider audience.¹⁸ The importance of archiving Baldwin's life points to a new eclectic interaction that scholarship can have with authors that counter the "history of systemic erasure of black lives."¹⁹ Archiving Baldwin's home and life in this way can provide something as simple as context for understanding who the person of Baldwin was when he was not arguing with white liberals on a television set or writing about the ways that he retains his American identity everywhere he goes while (necessarily) critiquing all of the institutions that make up the country and her identity. In this field of Baldwin studies, one can see that the way digital humanities are engaging and will continue to engage with Baldwin will look markedly different from the ways that scholars have historically approached his life and work. The need to preserve, albeit in the digital world,

¹⁸ Zaborowska, Magdalena. "Black Matters of Value: Archiving James Baldwin's House as a Virtual Writer's Museum." *American Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2018): 505-529. [doi:10.1353/aq.2018.0033](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2018.0033).

¹⁹ Ibid.

and even recover the life and the work of James Baldwin demonstrates that the effect that Baldwin had on the world is not finished, and that his legacy is continuing to grow, and in some cases, change completely.

Another way that digital humanities is exploring the world of James Baldwin is the way that newer generations are pull-quoting James Baldwin to situate him as a hero forgotten by history. The presence of social media has drastically altered the way that people can interact with an author because of the short nature of tweets and photo captions that are only long enough to post a brief quote without any grounding or context of the word that surrounded the quote, much less the subject of the work that the quote is pulled from. In many cases, the meaning of certain quotes as well as the address of its origin is completely lost as internet users post and re-post the quotes again and again without checking the original text or confirming the intent of the line. In a digital humanities work by Melanie Walsh, Walsh tracks some seven thousand tweets out of thirty-two million attached to the Black Lives Matter movement that attributed quotes to James Baldwin, finding that across all of these uses and misuses of things Baldwin said or did not say, exemplified the way that the circulation of any quote on a wide enough scale allows people to pick and choose the identity of the

person they are quoting, and neglect the fullness of their identity.²⁰ For example, though the most frequent quote Walsh found was actually a misquote of Baldwin, it was similarly spread in the late 60s and early 70s, also as a misquote, by a group that was outspokenly against many of the things that Baldwin actually did say.²¹ This piece shows that at least on twitter, the resurgence of Baldwin that does not speak truthfully of his life or work is part of the tradition of misaligning him that perhaps led to his lapse in major literary awards in the first place. Reclaiming his literal writing as a recovery piece seeks to correct the public misconception about Baldwin's work and its meaning for the purpose of defending exactly what it was that made Baldwin's work last this long in the first place.

Method

Now, to briefly define the methodology by which I will perform this quantification of Baldwin's magnitude. Drs. Howard and Kenton Ramsby, in an article published to their personal blog,²² that was itself inspired by Metacanon²³,

²⁰ Walsh, Melanie. "Tweets of a Native Son: The Quotation and Recirculation of James Baldwin from Black Power to #BlackLivesMatter." *American Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2018): 531-559. [doi:10.1353/aq.2018.0034](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2018.0034).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ramsby, Howard, and Kenton Ramsby. "Beginning with a Dataset of 300 African American Texts." *Cultural Front*, 28 Sep. 2020, www.culturalfront.org/2020/09/beginning-with-dataset-of-300-african.html.

²³ Metacanon is online interactive canon generator that measures the significance of American texts based on a score calculated based on number of citations and the weight of where the citations are found. See, Nathaniel Conroy, "METACANON," METACANON, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://metacanon.org/>.

present a data visualization of African American texts as they are represented in academic publications and in the New York Times, in order to demonstrate the significance of certain texts among scholarly and critical analysis as well as their relevancy. In this data visualization, the Ramsys score the writings of many authors, including James Baldwin, according to the number of times that the author and their work is cited across five different scholarly databases as well as a major publication, *The New York Times*. Baldwin's presence among the top two tiers assigned by the Ramsys shows that Baldwin's influence on academic writing waxes and wanes by work, yet remain significant. The dataset created by the Ramsys gave me the tools to decide how I will choose Baldwin's top fifteen essays, followed by two essays that I believe are important enough to include based on my own interactions with them. The seventeen essays are: "A Talk to Teachers," "Alas, Poor Richard," "Autobiographical Notes," "Down at the Cross," "Everybody's Protest Novel," "If Black English Ain't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" "Many Thousands Gone," "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew," "Nobody Knows My Name: Letter from the South," *Nothing Personal*, "Stranger in the Village," "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," "The Creative Process," "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," "The Harlem Ghetto," "Dark Days," and "The White Man's Guilt."

These seventeen essays were run through an established *topic modeling*²⁴ program provided by Google simply titled Topic Modeling Tool²⁵ that selected three topics through distant reading and the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm, where each topic is made up of twenty different terms. In simpler terms, computers use the program that utilizes a probability distribution algorithm to determine word clusters that are present in the digital corpus that is entered, then provides those word clusters as separate “topics” that likely represent themes that are present in the text and frequent, and this software finally shows the distribution of those topics across the entire corpus. Newspaper publications, such as *The New York Times*, use the LDA algorithm to categorize the topics across all of their articles in order to make more accurate recommendations to their readership than might be possible by only recommending based on individual keywords.²⁶ The software I use for this thesis does not assign a name for the topics, so each word cluster must be assigned a theme based on the association of the words with one another as well as the context in each essay surrounding those

²⁴Topic modeling is the examination by a computer program of word clusters that can be identified throughout an entire corpus of text. See, Roland, Teddy. ““Topic Modeling: What Humanists Actually Do With It.” A Guest Post By.” Digital Humanities at Berkeley, July 14, 2016. <https://digitalhumanities.berkeley.edu/blog/16/07/14/topic-modeling-what-humanists-actually-do-it-guest-post-teddy-roland-university>.

²⁵ Google offers this coding for free and downloadable for any user. See, “Topic Modeling Tool,” Google Code Archive - Long-term storage for Google Code Project Hosting. (Google), accessed March 22, 2021, <https://code.google.com/archive/p/topic-modeling-tool/>.

²⁶ Spangher, Alexander. “Building the Next New York Times Recommendation Engine.” The New York Times. The New York Times, August 11, 2015. <https://open.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/11/building-the-next-new-york-times-recommendation-engine/>.

words. The title of each topic will be based on my personal understanding of each word cluster according to my familiarity with Baldwin's works, but the topics themselves are made up of data pulled from the text by the topic modeling software.

The scoring given back from the topic modeling software is given in the form of a decimal percentage of that document relative to the total word count of the corpus. Because each of these numbers is a decimal, for the sake of ease I went ahead and multiplied each score by 100 so that it would be easier to understand. The essays entered into the topic modeling program are also varied in length, so one of the outputs provided demonstrates the proportional frequency of the topics in each essay, so that an essay that is only one or two pages but has around forty percent contribution from topic x does not appear as more significant than a forty-page essay with thirty percent contribution from the same topic x. The output which provides the proportional frequency does not show the number for that proportion, so all scores will be based off the percentage that each topic contributes to the essay *without* consideration of the length of those essays.

The essays, along with the topics, will be run through the website Voyant Tools²⁷—a website that allows specialized tools to supplement topic modeling to visualize the data present across the digital corpus—and then I will perform close

²⁷ Voyant Tools. Accessed March 14, 2021. <https://voyant-tools.org/>.

readings of each topic across a single text. I will create the data visualization by using the downloadable Tableau Public²⁸ software, participating in the practice termed data storytelling pioneered by Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic.²⁹ The use of visualizations to display data communicates a draw away from numbers and into a graspable story. This combination of effective data storytelling combined with an in-depth close reading separates itself from the mere presentation of data by preventing the underwhelming—in the way that purely reported numbers can be lifeless by themselves—and translating the significance behind the findings.

²⁸ “About,” Tableau Public (Tableau Software, September 2, 2020), <https://public.tableau.com/en-us/s/about>.

²⁹ Knaflic, Cole Nussbaumer. *Storytelling with Data : a Data Visualization Guide for Business Professionals* Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2015.

Results and Discussion: Race

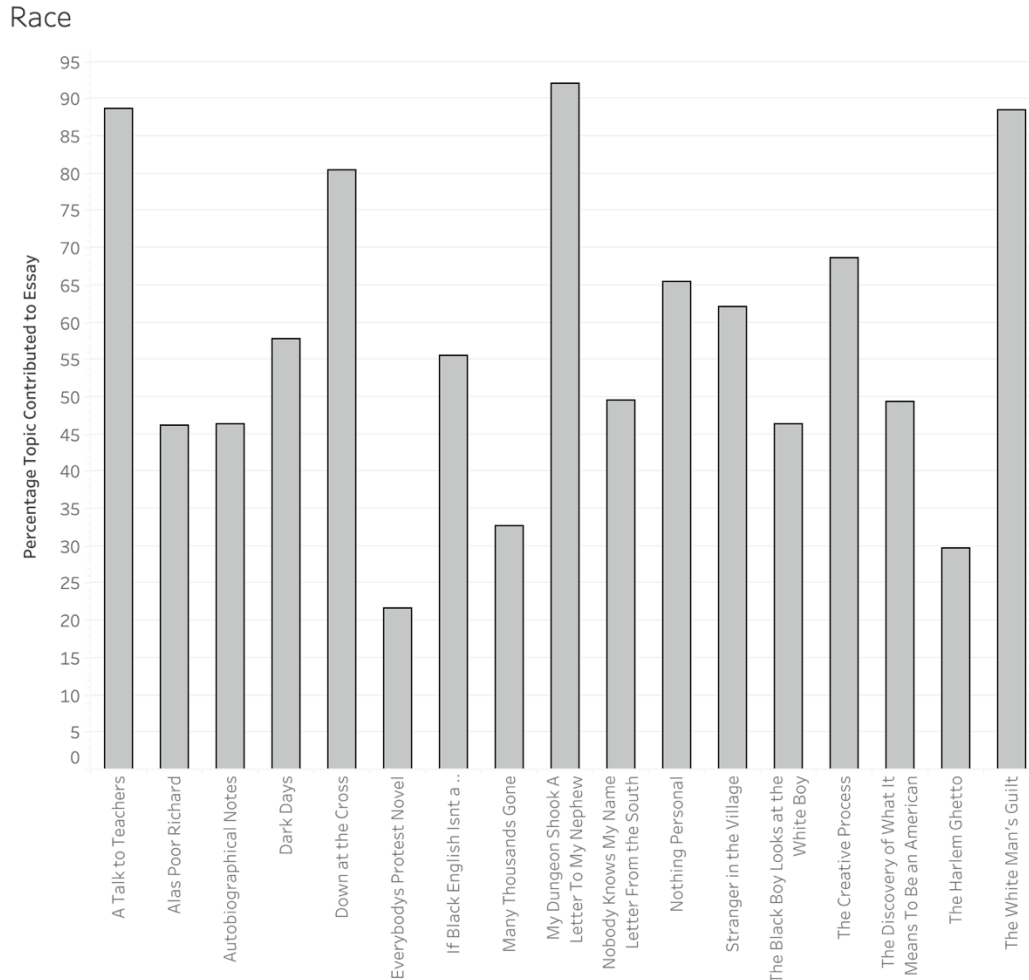


Figure 1

The topic modeling program presents the first topic containing the words: white, people, black, man, world, time, american, negro, men, life, long, great, fact, power, country, americans, make, human, day, and love. I have categorized this topic as “Race.”

We see that much of Baldwin's writing is filled by this topic. This, of course, is not surprising in the least. Baldwin had much to say when it came to the topic of race, and most of his non-fiction was built around his observations of the world around him, witnessing for any who would dare to read his work. Pointedly, Baldwin was not writing with an observable purpose to define race as a psychological, sociological, or philosophical issue. In the same line of thinking, Baldwin does not appear to write about the historical beginnings of racial categorization and then argue why from the beginning the claims made about people of other races are flawed based purely on origins. Instead, readers can see that much of what Baldwin was writing toward served to identify the disastrous effects that the conversation of race has had on the country and the people of America in order for the country to learn and turn from their past. Performing a close read of the essay "My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew" will reveal many of the nuances of Baldwin's opinions on race, specifically for the reason that it contained the highest concentration of this word cluster. The essay is very short, though readers should not discount the depth that Baldwin wrote to in such a brief essay. Through reading this letter with an awareness of the words that repeat in identifiable patterns, additional messages appear that would otherwise be overlooked for the sake of a content-focused close read.

Baldwin's essay begins by telling his nephew that this letter is his sixth attempt. Five times already he has written the start and then torn it up. This is not,

however, his only mention of time. In fact, much of the beginning of the letter, especially in the second paragraph, deals with this cluster term “time.” Baldwin refrains from using the term as often as his use of the words like “black” “men and “white” “people,” but I feel as though investigating the times he does use it reveals that there is this theme underneath the letter that represents a sort of grasp on longevity, or the length of generations that stretch back into the past that tie to the present American people and specifically his nephew James. But because this word “time” has been attached to these other words related to the issue of race in America, the focus must be on the way the two concepts are connected. How does time function in a world defined by race? How does race function in a world measured by time? And then more personally, because the structure of this essay is a letter to his fifteen-year-old nephew, how is Baldwin connecting his nephew to this understanding of time as generational longevity? Asking these questions born out of attention to the presence of this word cluster within the text and the surrounding context demonstrates what is a key theme in the letter.

Baldwin writes of the crime white people commit against black people very early in the essay, and not by talking about how singular it is in world history. No, Baldwin connects this crime of racial hatred to all destruction, death, war, and devastation from as early as man’s origins. He establishes that race is only one of the recent manifestations of that tendency. Though tragic, the black people are connected to that world history in a way that white people are not.

Baldwin is not implying here that the pain caused by racism in some has helped them. Rather, their *knowledge* of the truth of the country's foundational ideologies related to skin color and human worth gives black people a better understanding of world history. White people, on the other hand, who do not know Harlem, who do not know that there is no exaggeration in Baldwin's message to his nephew, are wholly unaware of this side of the world. Baldwin writes: "They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."³⁰ They have trapped themselves in a history that is their own making, no less. Generations after the founding of the country, white people are unable to see where they have come from and how they are connected to the world. Baldwin remarks that "If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go."³¹ The logical inverse of Baldwin's words could be read as "if you do not know whence you came, there is a limit where you can go." The result of white people's trap is that they are limited where they can go, the aspirations they can have, and how they can live.

To avoid that historical trap, Baldwin is encouraging his nephew to know that history. He is showing him how the knowledge of where he came from and

³⁰ James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook" in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison. (New York: Library of America, 1998). 291-295.

³¹ *Ibid.*

what he came into open up that future, but somewhat differently from speaking to white people, he is also connecting his nephew directly to their family and the generations that have preceded him in this history. When Baldwin uses the words “Negro,” “black,” “country,” “Americans,” and most importantly “love,” he is discussing both the ways that white men have ascribed this role in society to African Americans as well as simply the reinforcing of his nephew’s skin color as a positive thing. Black is not only defined by the social construct of race by white people, and it is not defined by the descriptions whites try to assign to those black people. Baldwin’s nephew may be connected to this history of crime and pain because white people put him in the ghetto for being “black and for no other reason,”³² but there is also a good history to which he is connected.

Many of the mentions of the “world” are contrasted by descriptions of their family: the nephew’s father and his laughter, his grandmother’s absence of bitterness despite witnessing the conditions in which her offspring were born, and the love that meant survival for the family who was trembling against the world that seemed to be made for the purpose of their perishing. The survival of his family is as much the boy’s history as the crimes against that same family.

Baldwin reminds him that his identity as an African American, too, connects him to something in America that is greater than the odds stacked against him:

³² Ibid.

You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, *The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*

The spiritual from which Baldwin names this essay represents to Baldwin's nephew that his aspirations are within reach and that the illusions of their captivity will fall away. Provided, of course, that he remembers whence he came.

In investigating the way that these words of race operate within time, one thing becomes abundantly clear: the world that exists around the conversations of race in America is a different one for African Americans than it is for white Americans. Baldwin includes this notion often in his letter. Drawing closer to use of the cluster terms "world," "time," and "country," surrounding the division of "white" and "black," reveals that there is frequent contextual mention of the concept of reality. This reality is more than just a literal description of the world, but rather, Baldwin is drawing his nephew's attention (as well as any reader's) toward the divergent rules that make up the way the world works according to the person who's is speaking. While Baldwin touches on the description of the black person's world when he describes the conditions into which his nephew was born, the assumption is that Baldwin is describing in the black person's world the true reality that exists. He is describing the world in authenticity. The logical assumption then is that the world according to the white American is not the true reality. Understanding this and then questioning how he demonstrates this leads

the reader to investigation in the text of why the white person is so deluded into believing in a false reality.

One of the faults mentions of his own father, James' grandfather, is that "he really believed what white people said about him."³³ What Baldwin was communicating was that white people had a conception of the black person that was not the truth about black people. This is the basis upon which they have built their false reality. White Americans believed that black people were inferior. They believed they were sub-human. That singular belief is as constant to the reality that the white people have created as the stars are in the skies. Questioning this single notion threatens all of the notions of the white world. Baldwin writes about the ensuing chaos thus:

Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.³⁴

Baldwin is suggesting that the "moving" of the African American is not a departure from behaving in accordance with the descriptions given centuries ago, but from the revelation that they were never accurate to begin with. The reason this is such a destructive revelation to the reality white men have fabricated is due

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

to the way they have defined themselves as superior to black people. One could reverse an earlier phrase of Baldwin's from this letter and say that the assumed superiority of the white person is because they were white and for no other reason.³⁵ So to see the black American moving out of their place, white Americans, too, would have to move from their place. Baldwin writes that "in this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity."³⁶ Reality alters, the position of the African American moves, and white people lose their identity. Those are powerful and destructive results to the confrontation of true reality.

Baldwin's purpose for this letter seems as though one could summarize it as an exhortation to his nephew to embrace life with love, aware of the obstacles that will challenge the nephew purely due to his skin color. Of course, Baldwin knows and acknowledges that his nephew already knows that blaming it on their skin color is not an accurate representation of the issue at hand. Rather, the issue is over the reaction of the white people in American toward people with their skin color. What is worth noting in this essay is not purely the acknowledgement that white people tell lies about the black person's humanity, though Baldwin does that too, but that there is a more rounded description of the situation and the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

relationship that the two groups in America hold with one another. Drawing nearer to mentions of “black” “men” and “white” “American(s)” reveals how present these descriptions are within the text in name alone. And throughout the essay, Baldwin continually uses this term “countrymen” following the uses of “people,” “country,” and especially his descriptions of white men. One must ask the questions then: how is Baldwin highlighting the unification of black and white people despite this problem of the very nature of white people’s treatment of black people? And perhaps further: how does Baldwin expect his nephew to understand his so-called countrymen?

Baldwin points regularly to a white people, for his nephew. He talks about what they tell black people, and what is at risk when they start to believe it as his father did. He tells of the crime that they have done to his brother, the boy’s father, and “how narrowly he has survived it,”³⁷ but that a multitude of black people have not. He also talks of the soul-crushing conditions that they have enacted that children like James must live in, purely for the purpose of their destruction. Meanwhile, this “white” “American” “people” and “world” are juxtaposed with the paradoxical description of countrymen. At another point he calls them innocents. We can tell that in a sense, Baldwin is writing this way to achieve some irony, but we also see that Baldwin is reminding white readers that

³⁷ Ibid.

this ghetto meant for the destruction of black people exists in *their* country as much as it does in black people's country. The effect the ghetto has on white people is of no comparison, but a different problem exists for them in their culture of destruction. In Baldwin's words: "They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."³⁸ Essentially, white people have entrapped themselves in their own delusions about black people. These delusions bear no relation to reality, and yet it is because of them the white people in their blinded power continue to attempt to shape the reality of their country according to this delusion. When Baldwin refers to the white Americans as his nephew's countrymen, he is reminding him that the conditions which he was born to are destructive just as the delusions white people have been born into are destructive. These two conditions are not equal, though there is a sense that all Americans are born into a country defined by both sides of that issue.

Baldwin's exhortation is not simply that his nephew become like those white men who shape the consequences of reality to their interiority. In fact, Baldwin's language seems to suggest a greater response—a response that should shape the way that Baldwin expects countrymen truly to behave toward one another. We find the model in Baldwin's description of the life of his brother.

³⁸ Ibid.

Baldwin writes of the way he has been present in his brother's life from his birth through his coming upon manhood, remembering all the faces, laughter, and tears from his brother's life. Likely more important, Baldwin knows the devastation that their country has put his brother through. This idea is contrasted with Baldwin's declaration later in the essay that "[White Americans] do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you."³⁹ For white Americans to become the true countrymen of black Americans, they must learn the reality of the lives of black Americans, as well as Baldwin knows the history of his brother. In the penultimate paragraph of the essay, Baldwin gives very clear directions to his nephew that echo this truth that up to this point he has been communicating through the continued focus on the idea of countrymen. Baldwin writes:

But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.⁴⁰

This message of brotherhood is notably not being preached to white Americans, though this is a public essay and they are able to read it now as well as then, but it is being preached to Baldwin's nephew. By forcing white Americans to see the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

reality of America and the damage that they particularly have caused, the brotherhood within the term countrymen can cease to be an ironic paradox, and could become the true feeling between white and black Americans.

It's easy to see how the magnitude of race in Baldwin's writing would be relevant to a modern audience. Since the murders of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and more recently Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement picked up steam in a way that took over city streets as well as bookshelves. The year 2020 saw a dominant takeover of bestsellers lists with titles regarding racism.⁴¹ Baldwin's work was pulled right along with this rise. Google Trends shows that the most James Baldwin has been searched since they started keeping record in 2004 was June 2020, and that the number was nearly double any previous peak.⁴² This is helped, of course, by 2016's Oscar-nominated *I Am Not Your Negro*, Raoul Peck's documentary made from one of Baldwin's unfinished manuscripts that, Baldwin scholar Warren Crichlow wrote, "seamlessly echoes recent television news depicting urban rebellions."⁴³ Francis Consuela explains the lasting relevancy of the way Baldwin

⁴¹ Harris, Elizabeth A. "People Are Marching Against Racism. They're Also Reading About It." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 5, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/books/antiracism-books-race-racism.html>.

⁴² "James Baldwin' Interest over Time." Google Trends. Google, n.d.

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=james%20baldwin>.

⁴³ Crichlow, Warren. "BALDWIN'S RENDEZVOUS WITH THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO." *Film Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2017): 9-22. Accessed April 1, 2021. doi:10.2307/26413805.

handled race, in fact, the way that Baldwin's writing speaks to modern day issues, as well as it did to events sixty years prior, thus:

It would be wrong to reduce Baldwin to a writer who wrote only or simply about race. Indeed, any field that aims to articulate the complexities of social identities and the societies they exist in... will find an intellectual comrade in Baldwin. Yet because our country is still full of people more comfortable with evasion and amnesia than they are with one another, and because we, in many ways, are a country still choosing between gangrene and amputation, the honesty and clarity with which Baldwin addresses these issues still resonate.⁴⁴

So long as America delays identification of her past, Baldwin's writing on the issue of race will continue to be magnitudinal because of the distilled truth he managed to put to paper.

⁴⁴Francis, Conseula. *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010: "An Honest Man and a Good Writer"*. Rochester, New York: Boydell & Brewer, 2014. Accessed March 21, 2021. doi:10.7722/j.ctt5vj7xx

Results and Discussion: Politics

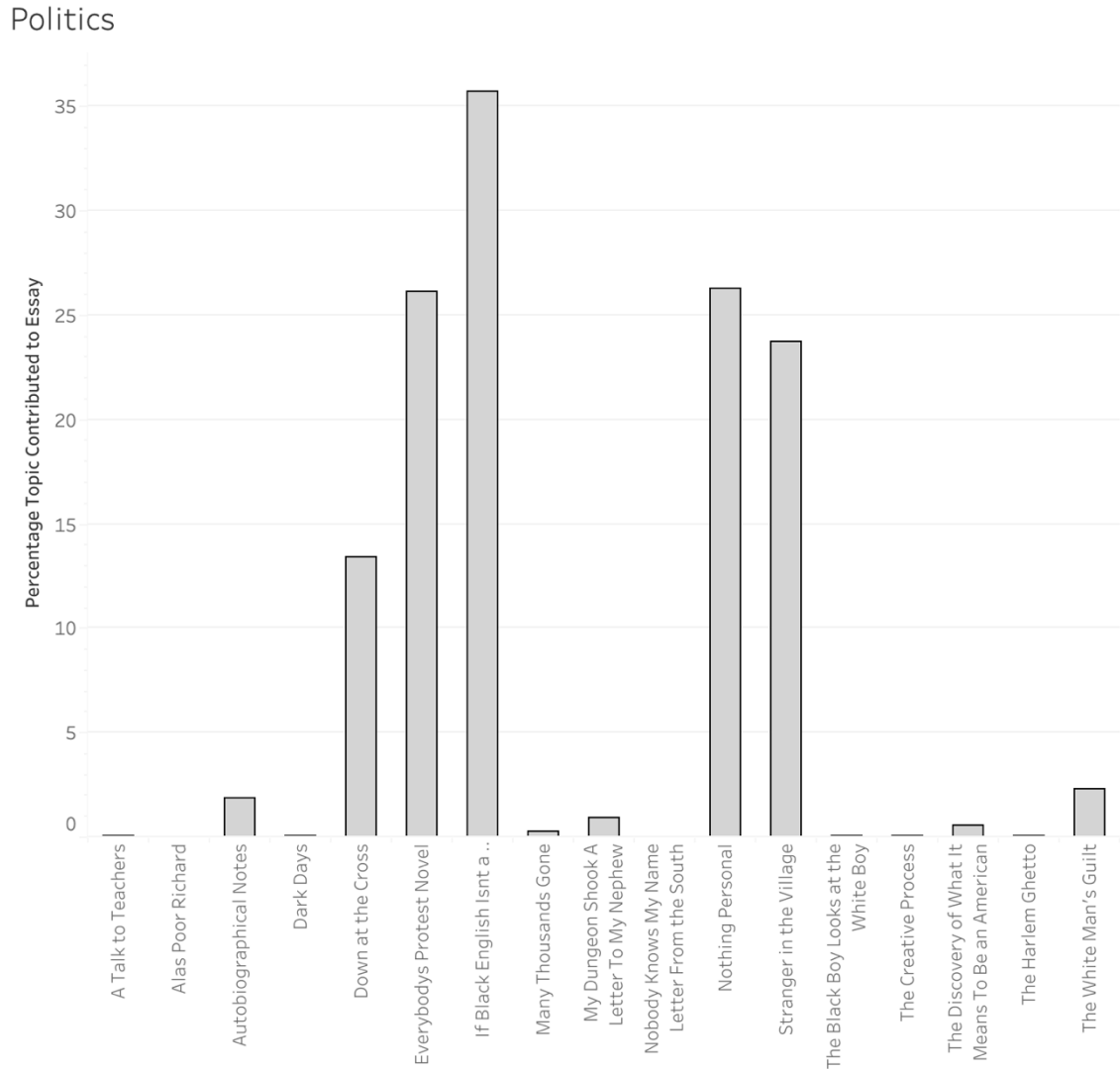


Figure 2

The second topic provides the terms: language, village, devil, virtue, stranger, necessity, terror, sound, evil, hong, truth, eyes, unprecedented, air, Russian, English, battle, kong, hair, and villagers. Each of these terms deals with

the way people connect to the world, whether it's the formation of language, morality, despair, love, community, or nation. Thus, the topic will be labeled "politics."

Now, there are some clarifications required here. The first is that this title is given according to the way these words appear across all seventeen essays. The second is that the politics at question are not necessarily the strictest form of politics to which people commonly refer. Instead of including conversations of how nations should be run, or party divisions over the issues du jour, or arguments over the size and reach of governments, politics in this category refers more to the Greek origins of the word. Basically, politics refers to the way citizens interact with one another. This makes for a far more intimately close reading of the topic, and it also examines more timeless components in Baldwin's writing rather than talking simply about issues that could only be contextually understood the year that an essay was penned and published. Baldwin's writing in the essay *Nothing Personal*, originally released with a photo-essay, relates beautifully to this focus on interactions between citizens. While the amount that the word clusters appear in this text may be less of a percentage compared to the other topics, there is plenty of significance to the times they do appear, as well as similar language and ideas within the essay to which we should pay equal attention. In some of the cases, those other ideas and words are more noticeable because of the attention we must pay to the cluster terms. By observing the text in

this way, we begin to see patterns of meaning in *Nothing Personal* that are important to a deeper understanding of the text as a whole as well as its relevance.

In *Nothing Personal*, Baldwin captures a few scenes where he plays with this idea of the language that a community of people share. Obviously, when people are interacting often enough with each other, there is a form of communication that develops amongst the people, separate of the literal language that they speak, that defines the way that they speak to and interact with each other. This can be the way they define their history, what they determine represents truth, and then more generally the way they define a host of other commonly held ideas or shared beliefs. *Nothing Personal* does not operate as a documentation of that language, but there are moments when Baldwin is interacting with that language, or perhaps interacting with the readers' understanding of it. After highlighting the words from this topic in the text and observing the way they are employed by the text, one must ask plainly how Baldwin is representing the language of America, and how is he challenging some of that language. Answering these questions, there seems to be a clearer point to the essay than is discernible in a first read.

In the third paragraph of the essay, Baldwin uses the cluster word "truth." He also uses the word myth, the inverse of that concept, if you will. He addresses these terms first to an intentionally humorous idea that Plymouth Rock landed on the Americans instead of Americans landing on it, and then pontificates the

relationship Americans have to the continent and its founding. This is basic to the development of a shared language. Of the results of the founding, Baldwin writes this:

The inertness of that rock meant death for the Indians, enslavement for the blacks, and spiritual disaster for those homeless Europeans who now call themselves Americans and who have never been able to resolve their relationship either to the continent they fled or to the continent they conquered.⁴⁵

Baldwin explains that while the American mythology is often that the nation was founded by heroes and successfully produced a land of salvation and financial success for all, the truth is that it has mostly been a bad thing. And notably, not only for minorities.

Further down Baldwin explains that even to the poor southern white person, the “terror” and “evil” of their poverty are misplaced by the efforts of white supremacy for the sake of ease or safety (on the behalf of white people only). The faulty understanding of the nation’s history has disastrous implications for the community of America as well as the individuals within it. Baldwin puts it this way:

⁴⁵ James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison. (New York: Library of America, 1998). 692-706.

It is perfectly possible—indeed, it is far from uncommon—to go to bed one night, or wake up one morning, or simply walk through a door one has known all one’s life, and discover, between inhaling and exhaling, that the self one has sewn together with such effort is all dirty rags, is unusable, is gone: and out of what raw material will one build a self again? The lives of men—and therefore, of nations—to an extent literally unimaginable, depend on how vividly this question lives in the mind.⁴⁶

The dirty rags that the American has sewn together are the lies in our language that we have deluded ourselves into believing, and the nation cannot rely on a community of people made of unusable selves. The terror is real, but so long as it is as misassigned as the understanding of the founding of the nation, there is no way to locate and avoid that terror.

In a more literal representation of this idea of a challenge to the nation’s language, Baldwin depicts this scene where his Swiss friend is forcibly taken from him because the two of them match a description. The issue, rather one of the issues in this situation, is that Baldwin was a model citizen and his friend was white, two facts that meant much less trouble for the police officers than they expected and maybe hoped for. Baldwin’s friend, whose native language was neither English nor an understanding of American politics, received the message

⁴⁶ Ibid.

that “if he wanted to make it in America, it would be better for him not to be seen with n—s.”⁴⁷ This police officer’s language was so confused that he felt that after attacking a stranger based on no evidence nor understanding of who he was attacking, that he then thought he should tell this friend how to avoid more trouble with Baldwin’s skin color. He could not see that it was his complete misunderstanding of skin color and the language he was born into that led him to assault this surprised and confused European who knew even less of the national language. Baldwin placed this story in the text in order to demonstrate clearly and ironically that the language in America is not functional. It does not communicate reality either in the present or about the past. Baldwin writes: “I take this to be, as I say, the American situation in relief, the root of our unadmitted sorrow, and the very key to our crisis.”⁴⁸ Baldwin does not shy away from the depth of those words, and that is shown throughout his writing with his interpretation of the American concepts of language and “truth.”

While language is an efficient shorthand for the way that a people engage in the politics of understanding one another, one must also pay attention to the larger pattern of interaction that takes place in any location. *Nothing Personal* engages that presentation, though it is not a dominant theme in the text without a

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

focus paid to these terms. There are scenes of New York, the mishap with the police and Baldwin's friend, and one or two street-level observations, but there is still enough depth in what Baldwin wrote for additional questions to be asked of the text. A thoughtful question has no necessity for complication, and thus one can ask of this text: what is the American community interaction? How does Baldwin depict the way that the politics of interacting with one another are present in his scenes? Those questions, though simple, are a wonderful launching point for a text such as *Nothing Personal* because of the depth Baldwin writes to, and the opportunity in this text to look further than just seemingly unconnected yet engaging stories.

Baldwin introduces the idea of a New York City immobilized by winter weather and then the city during a thawing spring. When the snow is there, New Yorkers are given an excuse to speak with one another and no longer remain the strange faces that pass by with no clue as to where they're coming from, where they're headed, or how they live their lives in the city. Baldwin remarks that the snow gives them an excuse to speak to one another. His neighbors do not naturally feel that they have the opportunity, and must instead wait on excuses. Baldwin reflects on the lack of singing, the lack of lovers, the treatment of poets, and the interactions with sky scrapers. What Baldwin hears, however, is the sound of someone vomited early in the morning after a night of drinking. What Baldwin sees are the faces that seem to exist in a stasis of terror. Rarely, he catches sight of

a young family or couple who for some uneasy-to-define reason do not blend in seamlessly with the buildings that tower over the city. One sees that this is no community at all. The residents of New York city live and operate as if they are automatons, unfeeling, and uncaring for the lives that exist around them. This clues Baldwin into the depravity of the state of the city. In so many words, “[our civilization] cannot be far from disaster; it cannot be far from the slaughter of the innocents.”⁴⁹ Baldwin uses very aggressive words to highlight that the people who are existing within the context are not neighbors, but are truly “strangers” as identified by the topic. Though he is writing about New York City, the reader doesn’t get the impression that this observation is specific only to that metropolis, but represented the whole nation totally.

Later on Baldwin ruminates on the way that children exist within this would-be community. He writes of the way they wander around in the exact same fashion as their adult counterparts, receiving no candy, no respect, and no love. It is simple enough to gather that Baldwin is not purely observing actual children as much as he is reflecting on the state of the community at large in his present day. Baldwin does not feel that any adults are treated with love or respect, and it is because of this that he sees it in the children as well. Baldwin sees that the community he was born into cares far more for material objects than it does for

⁴⁹ Ibid.

flesh and blood people. The community Baldwin sees appalls him. Despite the love he feels should be given to children, Baldwin is still calling for an ascent into adulthood because that is where the person must be to realize what Baldwin calls the “striking addiction to irreality.”⁵⁰ Without confrontation of that addiction from the adults, the rest of the community is doomed to remain ignorant—Baldwin uses “unprecedented” to describe the phenomenon of people in this community confusing ignorance for the “virtue” of simplicity. For any in the community to remain in this state and refuse to love that child into age and realization is to endorse a sort of cycle of stagnancy. The community of New York Baldwin is writing of perhaps does not exist, and will not so long as this pattern of interaction continues.

Following this trend, Baldwin does include in his essay a theme related to governance of the self or morality. Baldwin is not shifting away from the politics of community and citizenship any bit here. In fact, the idea of morality that Baldwin wrote about could be the way out for the community he is highlighting. “Hong” and “Kong” appear often at the end of the story, fittingly in an analogy that involves the city Hong Kong. And Baldwin wrote the name of the city enough times that it is actually the densest section of the essay with relation to the word cluster of politics. The morality that Baldwin presents in this brief story

⁵⁰ Ibid.

serves to be a touching story of the endurance of love, but more than that, this analogy serves to answer many of the questions the reader has been asking throughout the text so far. Why is the language full of incompatibilities? Where is the presence of community in this story? Baldwin wrote this story to demonstrate the type of action that must be taking for the preservation of a community and the people within. “Terror” and “battle” are still present within this tangent of morality, but to the ends of overcoming obstacles.

The analogy, to be brief, goes this way: if someone’s love of their life lived on the other side of the world, that location becomes the most significant place in the world, and any distance or challenge in the way would be covered for the sake of reaching the loved one. Baldwin wrote so beautifully:

We really emptied oceans with a home-made spoon and tore down mountains with our hands. And if love was in Hong Kong, we learned how to swim.⁵¹

Baldwin is capturing the sense of effort that people go to pursue what they love, and the way that reality alters around that loved one. Baldwin is pushing this as the idea that should represent the American community. In spite of the darkness present in American history. In spite of the history of debasement and destruction that affected Baldwin’s ancestry. All of that space that exists between humans on

⁵¹ Ibid.

either side of the tragedy can be won if somehow the community of America can wake and realize the connection shared by someone who does not in fact live on the other side of the world, but lives even next door. The trajectory of this community is not a fixed thing that cannot be moved. This section, with every mention of “Hong” “Kong” should reveal to the reader the absurdity of Baldwin begging the reader to understand a love that causes someone to swim from Chicago when there are people already here. Baldwin is suggesting how much easier it would be to change the politics of morality in American life. Baldwin is suggesting how much easier it is to replace the myth with “unprecedented” “truth” and “virtue.”

The relevancy of Baldwin’s political writings in their original context has been demonstrated again and again. In *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*, Peniel E. Joseph puts it this way: “The searing eloquence of his widely read essays on race, democracy, and civil rights, many of them published in major newspapers and magazines, made the black freedom struggle come alive for white and black readers.”⁵² While Baldwin is no longer the most respected black writer in America, the magnitude of his political writing is reaching unbelievable heights. According to *The New York*

⁵² Joseph, Peniel E. *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*. New York: Owl Books, U.S., 2011.

Times, “Baldwin died in 1987, but his time is now.”⁵³ Joseph Vogel explores this time Baldwin possesses and the way that Baldwin’s political writing has come to the forefront in his 2020 bibliographic article “Trends in Baldwin Criticism, 2016-17.” Vogel concedes that though Baldwin’s writing has always been political, The Trump presidency brought about the “overarching trend... [in recent Baldwin scholarship] is how invested it is in Baldwin’s relationship to the political realities of his home country, both during his life and now.”⁵⁴ This, no doubt, mirrors how Francis characterized the relevancy to the modern scholar to Baldwin’s writing on race, but as Baldwin himself wrote in his essay “Black Power:” “America sometimes resembles, at least from the point of view of the black man, an exceedingly monotonous minstrel show; the same dances, same music, same jokes. One has done (or been) the show so long that one can do it in one’s sleep.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Schuessler, Jennifer. “James Baldwin's Archive, Long Hidden, Comes (Mostly) Into View.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, April 12, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/12/arts/james-baldwins-archive-long-hidden-comes-mostly-into-view.html>.

⁵⁴ Vogel, Joseph. "Trends in Baldwin Criticism, 2016–17", *James Baldwin Review* 6, 1 (2020): 155-170, accessed Apr 2, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.6.10>

⁵⁵ Baldwin, James. “Black Power.” Essay. In *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan. New York: Vintage, 2011.

Results and Discussion: Black Experience

Black Experience

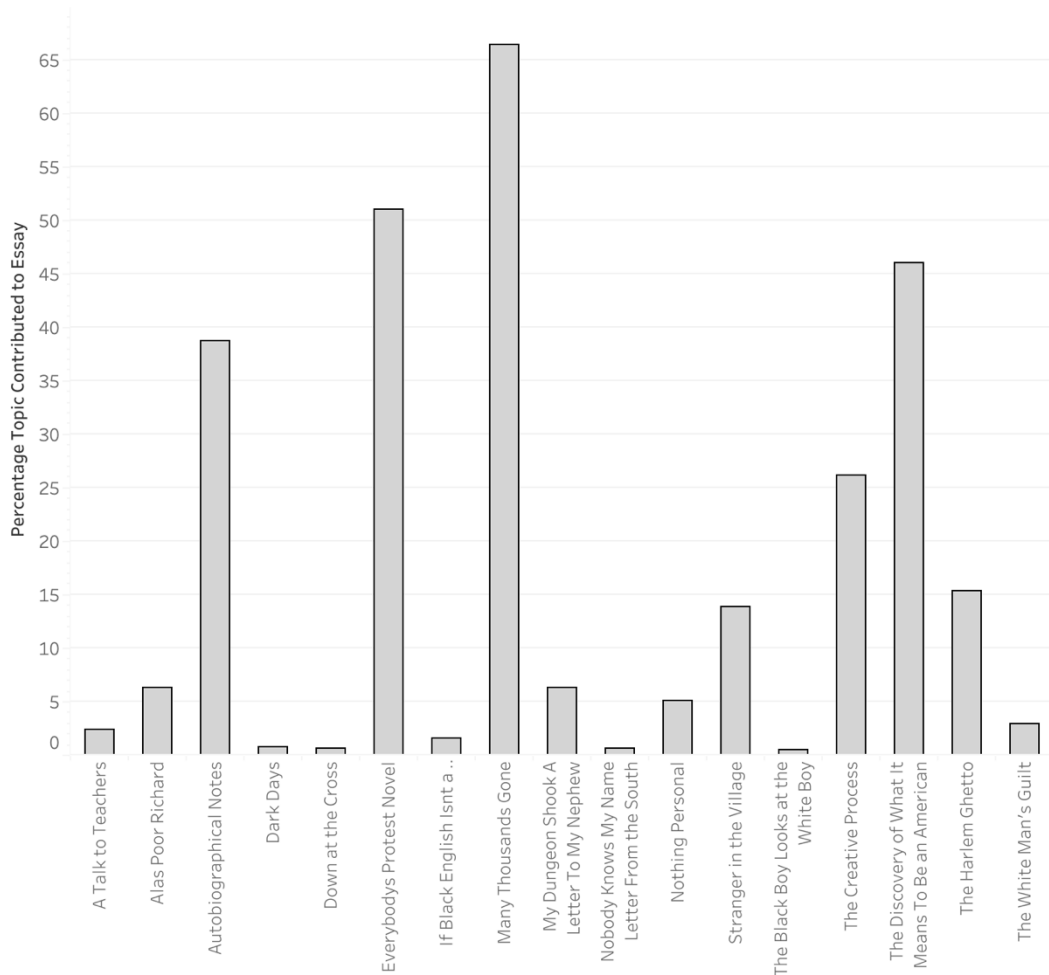


Figure 3

The program gave the fourth topic made up of the terms: negro, american, life, social, bigger, society, europe, america, writer, book, written, experience, artist, face, image, story, native, relationship, problem, and make. Because these words

deal so strongly with the lives of Black people, in the way they function in the States and abroad, and the way fiction depicts them, this topic is titled “black experience.”

While it is a simple task to read many of Baldwin’s essays and leave with a generalized understanding of what the experience of being a black American is like, it is important to draw nearer to the way that this is demonstrated in the specific language that Baldwin used throughout his text. There are a number of texts that are full of the language identified by this cluster, but for the purpose of this essay we will perform a close reading of the essay “Many Thousands Gone,” with some attention given obviously to the words present in the third topic, while also giving attention to the content of this particular essay and the patterns that reveal not simply a defense of the categorization of “black experience,” but further than that, avenues of investigation and interpretation that are exceptional to a content-only close read. Close observation to those terms will reveal deeper understandings of Baldwin’s text, when partnered with thoughtful questions regarding the structural and contextual use of specific, repetitive language.

By focusing on all the topic-specific words within this Baldwin essay, many things become immediately clear. The first is that words like “Negro” and “America/American” are often used in a relationship that is not quite oppositional, though there does seem to be an intended contrast with their connotations. Baldwin differentiates the two terms and uses them throughout his essay to draw

the reader nearer to the question of their difference. A close reading must then ask the question: why would Baldwin make it a point to use the words Negro and American so frequently paired to show the ways that they are not interchangeable? Once I asked myself this, I began to look into the ways that Baldwin highlights the behaviors of each, and specifically the way that each develops its own form of identity within the same borders. “Life”, “story,” “relationship,” and “experience” all began to present themselves within the text to show that Baldwin was interpreting not just who black people were in relation to white Americans, but that there was an expectation of black people to begin to live and exist at a distance from white America, despite any differences in lived experiences or treatment by those white Americans, in order for those black people to escape the not-too-distant ideas of a black person as sub-human or less than. The question then changes into one deeper and more targeted: how is Baldwin using this language to highlight the expectation of assimilation of black people by white people, including the effect that assimilation will have on both groups’ identities?

“Many Thousands Gone” is an essay as much about Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as it is about what it means to be a black person in America. Early on in the essay, Baldwin is quick to point out that this meaning of being black in America is the entire explanation of American identity for any American with any skin color. Baldwin establishes this identity as one created not by statistics of

behavioral difference, nor by biological, psychological, or sexual difference, and should black Americans ignore their socially constructed identity in order to be invited into the homes of white Americans, both groups are hurt. This “double alienation”⁵⁶ demonstrates the way assimilating black Americans deny their identity in order to eat at the table with white Americans (who will continue to prevent intermarrying, for example), and thus the white Americans lose the object of their dehumanization. To Baldwin, the subjugation of black Americans is only effective for white Americans so long as black Americans know their place as the subjugated. Once they attempt to assimilate into white social spaces without remembering their status and history, white identity is threatened all together. It is because of this that Baldwin continues to refer to the “Negro” and to the “American.” Under the current expectation from white people, the erasure of differentiation of black and white does not make both sets blank, but instead makes both faces white. This makes both faces offensive to both groups. Baldwin is communicating that assimilation without an understanding of the guilt present in the mere definition of difference is not only a refusal of justice, but it also will not be allowed by either side of American identity.

⁵⁶ James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison. (New York: Library of America, 1998). 19-34.

The use of “Negro” immediately juxtaposed against “American” serves as a shorthand communication of all that. Further, Baldwin’s use of the rest of the aforementioned terms—life, story, relationship, social, problem, etc.—are present at the introduction of these ideas. In the moments where Baldwin takes time to explain more deeply what is meant by those shorthanded terms that readers will notice, in fact, the absence of those terms. The final paragraph of the essay speaks mostly directly about the type of assimilation that is sought by those liberally minded men of his day, and because Baldwin is being so direct, there is no need for him to use the coded language of this word cluster, except when necessary. Baldwin’s entire idea of assimilation put on display in this essay can be further displayed in these last two sentences:

Our good will, from which we yet expect such power to transform us, is thin, passionless, strident: its roots, examined, lead us back to our forebears, whose assumption it was that the black man, to become truly human and acceptable, must first become like us. This assumption once accepted, the Negro in America can only acquiesce in the obliteration of his own personality, the distortion and debasement of his own experience, surrendering to those forces which reduce the person to anonymity and which make themselves manifest daily all over the darkening world.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Baldwin's "Negro in America" is not "us," and it is his insistence to highlight that difference throughout this essay the points constantly to the choice white America has given black America in order to maintain the white identity, and in turn the American identity: dehumanization or debasement through assimilation.

Baldwin's use of these words does more than point to assimilation in this essay. Baldwin also keenly defines black experience as existing within the cluster term "image." Baldwin communicates the understanding that the experience of being a black American is a socially created phenomenon, and he establishes very early on in the essay that part of the social created definition is the way that white people see black Americans as separate from white Americans. This image is a fragile one for the beholder, as Baldwin writes that "if [a black American] breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken and we feel ourselves betrayed."⁵⁸ One can logically follow this train of thought and realize that the entire image of the black American is of far greater importance to the beholder than it is to the subject, if the breaking leads to the panic inducing sense of betrayal for the white man. Baldwin goes on to say that this departure from image does lead to danger for the black American, and that the same danger is present for white Americans. But the important feature of this image that Baldwin refers to more than once is that this image, which represents the entirety of black

⁵⁸ Ibid.

experience and therefore black life in America, is not seen correctly by white Americans despite their role in created the image. And because this image is “story of America”⁵⁹ according to Baldwin, so long as white Americans are unable to view the image of black America authentically, they are prevented from having a right understanding of their own lives.

In the same way that “Negro” and “America/American” are so often paired in order to show the difference between the two, Baldwin uses the word “image” throughout this essay, about or followed by “Negro,” “life,” and “experience,” to demonstrate the way that much of the conversation regarding the black American’s life is defined by the perception of it, and especially in the eyes of the white Americans. Much of the essay is an analysis of the way that this image has affected the life of Richard Wright’s *Bigger Thomas*, though it is in this analysis that he is writing for the implications faced by every black American. And this is no recent event, either. According to Baldwin, the image was created when “the first slave beneath the lash,”⁶⁰ and it is that history that continues still in the face of every black person. To look on a black face is to see the guilt of such an atrocity as chattel slavery, as well as the modern delusions of inferiority and depravity. Baldwin’s language surrounding the image is one that is perpetual,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

fearful, monstrous, painful, and intolerable. In many ways, Baldwin writes as though the summative statement of all of the problems black people experience in America is represented either in their own acceptance of this image, or their inability to present anything counter to it. This is how it was for Bigger Thomas, and Baldwin imagines that this is how Baldwin saw it for every black American of his era.

That inability that white Americans have of rightly seeing the image of the black person is an important issue at the forefront of much of Baldwin's language in this essay. There are two moments where Baldwin says what may act as the thesis statements for the language included in this cluster, and these are not far enough apart from each other that they cannot be read as logically joined:

“Americans, who evade, so far as possible, all genuine experience [in their ignorance of the state of black life], have therefore no way of assessing the experience of others and no way of establishing themselves in relation to any way of life which is not their own... ..since no American has the knowledge or authority to contest [Bigger Thomas' monstrosity] and no Negro has the voice.”⁶¹

In this line of thought, Baldwin argues the habitual avoidance of investigation into the image of the black American and what that might represent, and how that act

⁶¹ Ibid.

disqualifies white Americans from speaking authoritatively on peoples so long as they ignore the state of the black experience, while they are simultaneously silencing those black people who could speak to it with authority. This is precisely the reason for the inclusion of contrasting cluster terms in “Negro” and “America/American,” or the need to specify that it is often the “image” of the “story” or “face” of the black American and not the reality. Baldwin too is committing to only focusing on the image of the life of black people and not the reality because that was the “problem” writers were addressing. In his own words from earlier in the essay: “what it means to be a Negro in America can perhaps be suggested by an examination of the myths we perpetuate about him.”⁶² This myth, the image of black experience, is the reason for the usage of these cluster terms.

Of course, as much as these issues of image and assimilation are at the forefront of the language in this essay, Baldwin uses the same language to ground both within the context of the social arena. He does this outright in some places, such as his continued literal use of the topic word “social,” and other times by restricting his commentary to what pertains to the social, as opposed to a medical, psychological, religious, or legal arena. There are some obvious reasons for this: Baldwin is not a lawyer, nor is he a physician. But while the conversation regarding race in America had up to that point often been defined according to

⁶² Ibid.

those realms of understanding, and much of the conversation since drifts in and out of those areas, Baldwin confines his language to the borders outlined only by social construction. He writes plainly: “[The black person] is a social and not a personal or a human problem.”⁶³ Baldwin’s discussion never departs from this. Readers must grasp this imperatively, for to interpret any of this essay through the lens of legalistic review, medical evaluation, or even religious inculcation—despite Baldwin’s treatment of his own religion and morals in numerous other essays and novels—would drastically alter the most basic structure upon which he built the arguments of the essay.

The social language of this essay is apparent in the discussion of *Native Son* because of Baldwin’s assessment of Bigger Thomas as a social person and his embittered relationship to the society which created him. According to Baldwin’s interpretation, this is not a facet of reality but reality itself. Baldwin is not writing begging America to change the rules of society so that Bigger can reflect a better society, nor is he defending social rule as the emphatic end-all definition of its inhabitants. But when Baldwin talks about things such as the relationships between masters and their slaves, or the image of the black person and their life experience, he structures social relationships as the lens through which all of the essay can be seen. Phrases like “social arena” and “social reality” are peppered

⁶³ Ibid.

throughout the text, flanked by “experience” and “story” and “life.” That lens, that basic structure of Baldwin’s message, starts to color every sentence differently. When Baldwin mentions life or experience, he is talking more about the emotional damage that comes through social relationships than he is talking about physical injuries or possessions. Every utterance of “Negro” becomes a moment that a person is identified as socially opposed to and distant from the white American. The use of “image” reveals the social objectification that black people encounter as the object of imaging, compared to the desire to be socially related to. Once a reader sees that this word “social” is part of the cluster not due to its word count, but because of the unique way it defines Baldwin’s entire meaning, this essay no longer operates as an analysis of a book but a manifesto for relational trauma. To define this text socially is to understand Baldwin’s story of black experience in America.

Yet again, this present topic of black experience from Baldwin’s writing has found a timelessness that is incredibly important to readers today. The entire movement of Black Lives Matter is based around the idea that the life of a black person is important and worth protecting because it has value, and that Baldwin was defending the validity of experience as inherently valued shows just how immensely prophetic he was. Of course, the need to write authentically about the black experience seems apparent, but often scholars can rely on the arbitrary placement of all black people into a bin of archetype, role, or symbol of the time

that they represent to whatever movements or trends that are circulating. This practice was a problem in the 60s and it continues to be a problem today as the proliferation of Black culture has become dominant in the sphere of what is American pop culture. Kim Gallon draws in to the way that this popularization of the black experience on pop culture has complicated the way that students have understood how much of pop culture comes from black Americans and what makes it explicitly the black experience, along with a heap of other questions and exercises that draw the critical attention of students to what is implicitly and authentically black.⁶⁴ Without coming to a conclusion on what blackness means for her class and her students, Gallon demonstrates more than anything the complicated history and depth of study that is required were anyone looking to academically explain exactly what the black experience is at each stage in American history. The complexity in this definition today demonstrates how vital it was for Baldwin and other black authors to write as honestly as they could about the authentic experience that they themselves experiences so that future readers are able to accurately understand without fear of misunderstanding or the study of stacks of scholarship to be able to interpret with historical accuracy just what was going on.

⁶⁴ Kim Gallon. "Making Blackness "Strange": Teaching Black Popular Culture Theory in a "Post-Racial" Moment." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 24, no. 1-2 (2014): 67-84. Accessed April 3, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/trajincschped.24.1-2.0067>.

Conclusion

That James Baldwin was an excellent writer is hardly up for debate now or in the middle of the twentieth century, either by the general public or the work of scholars and critics. The way Baldwin handles questions like American identity and the future of racial relationships was markedly significant and led to many different avenues of the Civil Rights Movement and successive Black Power movement developing more nuanced and complex definitions of what it meant then to be a black American, and what progress would look like in the future. Even without the celebrity, the magazine covers, or television appearances, Baldwin reached considerable heights as a writer and figure in the American consciousness. Moving forward, scholars might begin to represent him and his work relating to the world with the very same honesty that he himself depicted the world in his writing. When Baldwin's popularity continues its ebbs and its flows, scholarship can have another base on which they can promote his writing as a magnitudinal and timeless study of what it meant to be a black American.

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