

James Baldwin and the Power of Black Muslim Language

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It is rumored that gods grow where the blood of a hanged man drips . . .
the black from which they were conceived.

—Nicole Sealey, “Even the Gods”

We are also left to ponder how sweet wild hymns and crime coexist,
whether the origin of American theater is to be found in a no-longer-
remembered primal scene of torture.

—Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

In the climactic section of his most famous essay, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” James Baldwin reflects on the politics of representation.¹ “It is not hard for him to think of white people as devils. For the horrors of the American Negro’s life there has been almost no language. The privacy of his experience, which is only beginning to be recognized in language, and which is denied or ignored in official and popular speech—hence the Negro idiom—lends credibility to any system that pretends to clarify it.”² These reflections on language represent the culmination of the central scene of the essay: Baldwin’s meeting with Elijah Muhammad and his ruminations on the impact of the Black Muslim movement. At the heart of those ruminations is his consideration of the power of Black Muslim language that gives voice to the realities of the black experience in the United States without “trying to flinch from it.”³ Baldwin wrote about what Paul Gilroy calls “a topos of unsayability produced from . . . experiences of racial terror.” “Though they were unspeakable,” Gilroy writes, “these terrors were not inexpressible,” and he traces, with vivid eloquence, how painful expressions of historical memories have been “inscribed and

incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation.”⁴ This article looks at the legacy of that cultural creation, the role of Black Muslim language in giving it expression, and its traces in Baldwin’s authorial voice, his writings, and his speech.

During the catalytic period during the early 1960s when “Letter from a Region in My Mind” was first published, Black Muslim language helped develop a cultural idiom at the heart of this “volatile core,” one that would find enduring expression in the black arts and Black Power movements, as well as in hip-hop language, music, and culture.⁵ These modes of cultural production produced counterhegemonic discourses, new pedagogies, and epistemologies that “reorganize conceptions’ of self and world in ways that ‘radically challenge sanctioned forms of knowledge’” and disrupt “dominant theories of knowledge by offering alternative ways of reckoning history.”⁶ Black Muslim language and ideology impacted Baldwin’s thought and expression, most vividly in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), but also over the arc of his career as a public intellectual. From his early meteoric rise to being frozen out of both the March on Washington and the Black Power movement (in Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*), Baldwin continually appealed to Black Muslim speech to “unburden black representation” from the “structural racism of bourgeois publicity.”⁷ Navigating the “hairline fracture” between “Negro idiom” and “official speech,” he located a space of intervention that enabled him to tell not just his own story but many stories while also addressing the problems of political and aesthetic representation of his time.⁸ This was the heart of the dilemma that structured his art, writing, career, and life. At this juncture, his life as art—and art as life—flourished in an outpouring of essays and writings that narrated his life story, the story of the people of his time, and the truth of American history occulted behind its white-washed version of itself.

Baldwin’s consideration and treatment of the Black Muslim movement began with his initial assessment of its ideas in a 1961 *New York Times Magazine* article republished in *Nobody Knows My Name*. This engagement intensified in public appearances, interviews, and debates with Malcolm X on radio and television, precipitating Baldwin’s meeting with Elijah Muhammad in the summer of 1961—the climactic central scene in Baldwin’s 1962 “Letter from a Region of My Mind.” Malcolm X’s rhetorical and discursive presence permeates the essay as the street-corner preacher in Harlem, as does Elijah Muhammad’s and Louis Farrakhan’s.⁹ Both Baldwin and Malcolm X were Harlem transplants from the South with Pentecostal upbringings and religious awakenings that helped fuel their fights for racial justice. They circled and trailed each other on their speaking tours of the South in early 1963 after *The Fire Next Time*’s publication, visiting the same spots and debating local activists.¹⁰ Baldwin’s

public lamentations over the assassinations of Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King Jr. in *No Name in the Street* (1972) planted the seed for his unfinished memoir, *Remember This House*, whose fragments and notes become Raoul Peck's 2017 film *I Am Not Your Negro* (which extensively quotes *No Name in the Street*).¹¹ Baldwin's screenplay *One Day, When I Was Lost* (1972) formed the basis of Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* (1992), though Baldwin would rue—and disavow—his own attempt to render Malcolm's life in Hollywood terms.¹² This article reconsiders the impact of Black Muslim ideas, thought, and rhetoric on *The Fire Next Time* and on Baldwin's larger literary, philosophical, and intellectual engagements with the black radical aesthetic tradition, the idea of the "Negro idiom," and a language that recognizes the black experience in America. The aesthetics and politics of sayability, of speech and expression, of sound and music have been particularly critical for articulating the alternative political possibilities of the black radical intellectual tradition.¹³ It is a legacy borne out in the linguistic performativity and the Islamic inflections of the black arts movement and hip-hop, what Samy Alim calls "Nation conscious wisdom."¹⁴

Despite widespread recognition of Baldwin's engagement with the Black Muslims, the vast literature on Baldwin instead emphasizes that he "rejected" their ideas.¹⁵ Yet Baldwin repeatedly appeals to Black Muslim speech as a nexus of representation of truths repressed in the American public sphere, articulated via a revived and reinvigorated black radical intellectual tradition.¹⁶ Even his critique of Black Muslim ideas of racial superiority becomes a strategic means of criticizing white supremacy and the "murderous" and "deadly" ends to which European peoples have put the white God of a colonizing Christianity. Baldwin makes use of a "funhouse mirror" that reflects back to the viewer his own prejudices.¹⁷ (From all evidence, though, white audiences failed to recognize themselves in that mirror.) As terror and hatred continue to be projected onto Islam in the face of the ongoing reality of racial terror in the United States, this "funhouse mirror" has real salience for parsing the politics of representation today.

Omitting Baldwin's serious consideration of Black Muslim ideas reinflcts the silencing of uncomfortable truths about black Atlantic history, the very histories Black Muslim theology sought to emphasize. It elides a legacy that continues to be a powerful signifier of a black liberatory aesthetic into the present, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy in which Black Muslims are "denied or ignored in official and popular speech." Sylvia Wynter describes this as the "'blocking out' of a Black counter-voice [that] was, and is itself defining of the way in which being human . . . dictates that Self, Other, and World should be represented and known."¹⁸ Given critical emphasis on Christian motifs and preacherly cadences in

Baldwin's writings, as well as a privileging of the narrative thread of civil rights over the radicalism of the Black Muslims, this dismissal occludes a critically important chapter in the history of black mobilization in the United States. Moreover, it blocks out of the legacy of Black Muslim political thought in the United States—though the multiple modes of expression it inspired have proved irrepressible. Black Muslim thought and theology do not fit comfortably with the aspirations of either the civil rights movement or immigrant Islam. Both have worked to absorb—and neutralize—Black Muslim critique of white racism and the white race. Both were reluctant to recognize the legitimacy of the Black Muslims.

A reassessment of the legacy of *The Fire Next Time* could not be more relevant, with a revival of James Baldwin in the 2016 release of *I Am Not Your Negro*, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's acquisition of Baldwin's papers in April 2017, and Taschen Publishing Company's 2017 celebratory art house edition of *The Fire Next Time* with accompanying photographs by Steve Schapiro. Despite the Nation of Islam's shift to mainstream Sunni Islam after Elijah Muhammad's death, their ideas continue to be of critical relevance to the politics of race today: their critiques of white supremacy, promotion of self-defense, resistance against police violence, and advocacy of education and self-knowledge “to anchor dissident assessments of modernity's achievements.”¹⁹ Black Muslim signs, symbols, and motifs continue to inform the cultural politics of representation—though they often go unrepresented as such. Moreover, the effect of the semishamanistic cultural idiom of Black Muslims on the black arts movement is a story yet to be told in its fullness.²⁰ This intellectual and cultural legacy demands reassessment, as much as acknowledgment of the enduring impact and relevance of Black Muslim critiques of the institutions and epistemologies of white power and white racism. As Americans continue to do battle over the signs and symbols of—the monuments to and signifiers of—their history of racial slavery, attention needs to be brought to the language Black Muslims developed for articulating their silenced genealogies.

The Tone of Black Muslim Language

With reason, analyses emphasize the power of Baldwin's “Gospel prose” and his literary use of sermon and music to articulate his “genius for the melody of words and details of scene.”²¹ But few recognize the influence of Black Muslim speech and language on Baldwin's authorial voice, particularly in “Letter from a Region in My Mind.” The first part of the essay powerfully narrates his evangelical awakening as a Pentecostal youth minister; the second section on the ideology and theology of the Black Muslims leads to another kind of parallel awakening into his vocation as a

writer, but partly by refusing moral and racial binaries. As Baldwin makes clear from his juxtaposition of seemingly opposed political idioms, Black Muslim language draws on the preacherly motifs from the black church, its street-corner preachers, apocalyptic imagery, religious euphoria, call-and-response, and close binding of preacher and congregation, speaker and listener. He describes Christian and Muslim liberation theologies as two dimensions of the battle for racial justice, one integrationist and the other separatist, suggesting W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness, as well as his understanding of a "nation within a nation."²² Black Muslims' speech, Baldwin argues, their political ideology, origin stories, and audible voice in debates about racial justice, develops an idiom, a formulation with explicit symbols, a system that clarifies the black experience in America.²³ They develop a contrapuntal, antiphonic dialogue with the Christian-inflected sit-in movement—what Baldwin describes as a fulfillment of the prophecy of "the fire next time."²⁴

Overlaying Black Muslims' political ideology with Christian hymns, Baldwin situates their preaching, words, and warnings in the tradition of black religion and the black church—but now with the emphasis on retribution, restitution, and redress. Throughout "Letter from a Region in My Mind," he uses Christian hymns to articulate the power of Elijah Muhammad's speech and presence ("take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there," "down at the cross," "no more water, the fire next time!"), echoes of "wild hymns" whose origins lie in "a no-longer-remembered primal scene of torture."²⁵ Speaking of Elijah Muhammad's words and discourse, Baldwin says that there is nothing new in this language: "Its emotional tone is as familiar to me as my own skin. It is but another way of saying that *sinners shall be bound in Hell a thousand years.*"²⁶ Baldwin's invocation of "tone" as simultaneously a shade of color, a musical or vocal sound, and a mood speaks to his multivalent contribution to and analysis of the black radical aesthetic tradition. He anticipates critical scholarly arguments like those of Rey Chow, who writes about tone as "an epidermalization of naming and calling" through its "visual and auidial significations . . . operating at the border between shade and sound." Chow asks us to rethink the politics and poetics of loss in contemporary cultural politics, the violence against native languages and cultures, and the "mourning, melancholia, and nostalgia over irretrievable origins."²⁷ The Nation of Islam origin story of white devils draining the "original black man" of his color and vitality by whitening and killing his children mercilessly symbolizes these lost origins.²⁸ But Baldwin's observation about the emotional tone of Black Muslim speech speaks to another historical truth, that the black church in America emerged from the "irretrievable origins" of African religion, including Islam.

The Nation of Islam is often unrecognized by immigrant Muslims and other Muslim groups as Islam, due to what Sherman A. Jackson calls the “theological and doctrinal excesses . . . and outright blasphemies” that brought disapproval—like assertions that God is Black, Elijah Muhammad a prophet, and the white man the devil.²⁹ In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin recounts the Nation of Islam origin story of the devil Yakub, an evil scientist who bred white devils from an original black man, a story (or fabulation or origin myth) that turns the American history of slavery into a complex and detailed allegory, one that Amiri Baraka later enshrined in his 1965 play *A Black Mass*. Malcolm X argues for the interpretation of these origin stories, the Garden of Eden and the snake, as an allegory.³⁰ In *Islam and the Black American*, Jackson describes the early adherents to Nation of Islam—“proto-Islamic Islamicizers”—as appropriating (rather than adopting or converting to) Islam. Jackson defines *appropriation* as a copy without a model: “The appropriator does not recognize the ‘property rights’ of the original owners.”³¹ These appropriations, these theological and doctrinal excesses, these “critical fabulations” become a means of “modeling the loss of self and the discovery of ‘another me.’”³² Here the story of Yakub is a parable of things lost—blackness, religion, language—through the venom of whiteness. But it also retells the story of history by reclaiming names.

Baldwin situates Black Muslims in the tradition of black religion, an observation later made by scholars like Jackson. “Islam among Blackamericans can only be understood in the context of the relationship between Islam and Black Religion . . . as constituting a distinctly American phenomenon, not unlike the Black Church.”³³ Black American Islam grew out of the tradition of black religion, argues Jackson, and he defines its central and most enduring feature as “its sustained and radical opposition to racial oppression. At bottom, Black Religion is an instrument of holy protest against white supremacy and its material and psychological effects.”³⁴ The ongoing realities of black Americans’ unequal place within American Christianity ultimately estranged them from the black church, he argues, paving the way for the appropriation of Islam by a disenfranchised northern, urban black underclass that had recently migrated from the South.³⁵ This is the class that James Baldwin, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X all belonged to. The black church “was no longer felt to be the place where one could freely express or ‘find’ oneself,” writes Jackson, even if black religion continued to inform expression.³⁶

Alongside memories and reflections on the theologies structuring his own life trajectory, Baldwin’s consideration of Black Muslim theology and oratory introduces a new but old linguistic vein into his authorial voice. There is a certain acoustics of the scene that brings Baldwin to a moment of self-examination, a self-realization, a self-reckoning in the

midst of Elijah Muhammad's "ricocheted questions" backed by the "chorus" of his followers.³⁷ Elijah mentions having seen Baldwin on television and observes that Baldwin is "trying to become himself." The Socratic dialogue represented in this climactic central scene echoes primal scenes from Baldwin's youth as a youth pastor in the Pentecostal church. The text underscores parallels between these different black liberation theologies through the question, "Whose little boy are you?" asked of him first by the Pentecostal pastor of his youth and again by Elijah Muhammad (but also by pimps and racketeers "on the Avenue").³⁸ The echoes, familiarity, and tone of the ricocheted questions themselves suggest an earlier, original voice that Baldwin probes in this and other writings as a question of identity, but also a question of color, sound, and idiom, buried under what he calls "so many lies." "Whose boy are you?" resonates with multiple intersecting significations—genealogical, racist, (homo)sexual, and religious. When Baldwin refuses this identification, this possession, it is toward a sense of self-possession. *I am nobody's boy*, Baldwin seems to say to us—the racial sense of which is reiterated in the title of *I Am Not Your Negro*. But there is a sexual sense, too, running as an undercurrent through the text, as Baldwin asserts himself through an act of self-possession.³⁹ Baldwin responds to Elijah Muhammad by refusing these various intersecting hierarchies, their assumed genealogies, binaries, and possessions. He responds by rhetorically asking, *Why am I who you say I am?* He asserts—in the name of writing his own story and in the name of self-authoring—that *I is an/other*.⁴⁰ He is a hu/man and a writer.

Baldwin's queerness runs as a tense undercurrent through these interactions—but also mandates that he escape reductive moral and racial binaries. He does so by heading in a Nation of Islam chauffeured car to the other side of town—to have a drink with several of those white devils.⁴¹ In the most obvious sense, he escapes—or subverts—the moral binaries of the Nation of Islam, their black-and-white racial binaries as much as their heteronormative ones.⁴² Baldwin stages these binaries in the scene in Elijah Muhammad's house, with the men in black on one side of the room and the women in white on the other gathered around a baby. Baldwin becomes nervously aware of the cigarettes in his pocket and the "white devils" he is meeting for a drink on the other side of town. In a less obvious way, Baldwin's queerness gravitates almost ecstatically toward black theology, the evangelical, and the messianic, as a way of sundering established binaries, teleologies, and genealogies.⁴³ It is Baldwin's way of summoning the reckoning, the accounting suggested by the apocalyptic title *The Fire Next Time*, as he counterposes Christian hymn and biblical flood with a cleansing fire bringing retribution and justice. "Down at the Cross" closes by asking us all to come halfway toward recognizing that other part of us, to speak the unspoken, to give voice to the silenced hole in

the whole. There is an “inappropriable ecstasies that goes along with this aesthetic,” Fred Moten writes of Baldwin. “This aural aesthetic is not the simple reemergence of the voice of presence”; it is transgressive, seductive, and reconstructive “by way of this new music.”⁴⁴ The hymns and songs interspersing these scenes give expression to a religious euphoria, promising a final accounting for the crime Saidiya Hartman describes, the primal scene of torture, but also produce a reckoning of the “truth” of the self, partly through what has been repressed, denied, and ignored.

In *In the Break*'s chapter “Visible Music” on Baldwin's language, writing, and aesthetics, Moten emphasizes the importance of music to articulate what words cannot, how it can say the unsayable, give voice to what has been silenced. He shows how Baldwin's phrasing is an orchestra(tion), a construction of a specific history through music and sound. Moten laments “the racial-historical determinations of language” that reduce its aural and phonic music to a Eurocentric ocular textualism. He uses the Arabic/Islamic/Qur'anic word *baraka* to describe Baldwin's music, something that protects against the evil eye with blessings and abundance.⁴⁵ He calls it an “aurally infused gaze,” a generative vision that augments reason with the musical ecstasy it has dismissed. When Baldwin refers to the speech and language of Black Muslims, he writes about Farrakhan's 1960 song “The White Man's Heaven Is the Black Man's Hell” and draws on “sweet wild hymns” to convey the power of Elijah Muhammad's speech and demeanor, wondering what it would be like if he could sing. Through these hymns, he juxtaposes, counterposes, and harmonizes what is seemingly diametrically opposed: Christian and Muslim liberation theologies, the civil rights movement and the Black Muslims, MLK and Malcolm X, in a climactic crescendo, an aesthetic balancing of color and sound, letters and songs, words and meaning. Moten calls this a breaking down of organizational principles, a generative meditation on the aspect of language that the text occludes. Sound improvises on idiom(atric difference) through a ritualistic “production of (a) (black) performance.” This, Moten says, is “the idea of the idiom.”⁴⁶

White Lies, Black Truths

Baldwin first discussed the phenomenon of the “Black Muslim movement” in his article “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood,” published in the *New York Times Magazine* March 12, 1961. The article provides a conceptual blueprint for the structure of “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” talking about the two most powerful “poles” of black mobilization in the country. “At one pole, there is the Negro student movement. . . . At the other pole is the Muslim movement, which daily becomes more

powerful.”⁴⁷ “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood” revolves around connections between the colonization of Africa and racial oppression in the United States, beginning with the protests of Patrice Lumumba’s execution, held at the United Nations on February 15, 1961.⁴⁸ In the aftermath of the demonstrations, the New York police commissioner blamed what he called the Muslim Brotherhood, “a fanatic Negro national cult, which is one of the most dangerous gangs in the city.”⁴⁹ To understand the protests, Baldwin writes, just walk through Harlem, something most white people won’t do, *or* consider the two most powerful movements for racial justice in the United States: the Black Muslims and the student sit-in movement. These movements, Baldwin argues, will keep black Americans from being controlled by “white America’s images of them. This fact has everything to do with the rise of Africa in world affairs” and with the rise of the Black Muslims.⁵⁰

Both the 1961 “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood” and the 1962 “Letter from a Region in My Mind” ruminate on the power of these dueling black liberation movements with their different means and ends. Both essays marvel at the power of Black Muslim rhetoric and oratory, its recognition of the black American experience, and the challenge it poses to dominant modes of white representation. The Muslim movement, Baldwin argues, has truth on its side and all the evidence as well. “It is quite impossible to argue with a Muslim concerning the actual state of Negroes in this country—the truth, after all, is the truth. This is the great power a Muslim speaker has over his audience. His audience has not heard this truth—the truth about their daily lives—honored by anyone else.”⁵¹ Baldwin refers to Black Muslim political critique as a truth, given moral weight through its appeal to religious truth, asking the listener to uncover the truth of self through knowledge. In an interview for the television documentary *Eyes on the Prize II*, Sonia Sanchez described Malcolm X’s speeches on the street corners of Harlem in similar terms: “He said, ‘I will speak out loud what you are thinking . . . I will now speak it for the masses of people. I am not afraid to say what you have been thinking all these years.’ That’s why we loved him.”⁵²

Just after “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood” was published, Baldwin engaged in several public conversations with Malcolm X on both television and on radio. They were framed as debates, but they were more a “tag team assault on white supremacy,” as one YouTube commentator observes.⁵³ On the April 25 radio show “Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins,” Baldwin appeared with Malcolm X and civil rights activist Laverne McCummings, reiterating the truth claims of the Black Muslims, talking about how “white power has been broken and this means among other things that it’s no longer possible for an Englishman to describe an Afri-

can and make the African believe it, it is no longer possible for a white man in this country to tell a Negro who he is and make him believe this. The controlling images are absolutely gone.”⁵⁴ And Baldwin describes this as “the responsibility which faces us, the question which faces us, which faces me in any case,” slipping between collective and individual registers. Baldwin talks about the truth of Muslim speech:

The importance of the Muslim movement is that it is the first time in the history of this country that a Negro audience has heard its own condition described without anybody trying to flinch from it. . . . This has tremendous effect, this is the reason a Muslim speaker has so much power over his audience, it comes out of a failure in the republic. This country has lied about the Negro situation for one hundred years. The lies are no longer viable.⁵⁵

Baldwin develops this point in “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” writing about Black Muslim speech as telling the truth about the black experience in the United States: “The truth about the black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, *has* been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world’s definitions.”⁵⁶

At this point in the early 1960s, the visibility—and audibility—of Black Muslims burst onto the public scene alongside the sit-in movement, with Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax’s television report *The Hate That Hate Produced* and C. Eric Lincoln’s scholarly work *The Black Muslims in America*. This is when Malcolm X began engaging more publicly in debates on radio, college campuses, and television, at the behest of, but also in tension with, Elijah Muhammad’s wishes. These interventions shifted the discourse on race in the American public sphere, as Eric F. Goldman observes at the outset of Baldwin and Malcolm X’s panel discussion “The Black Muslims in America” on the television program *The Open Mind*.⁵⁷ This led, as in the case of *The Hate That Hate Produced*, to denunciations of the Black Muslims as a “racist” hate organization, something Malcolm X deftly deflected in his 1962 Los Angeles speech “Who Taught You to Hate the Color of Your Skin?” Baldwin discusses this white hypocrisy in “Letter from a Region of My Mind,” with specific reference to the charge of violence made against Muslims (versus the sit-in movement’s embrace of nonviolence). The cry of “violence” is raised only when black men fight for their rights, Baldwin writes, whereas it is considered heroic (and democratic) when white men fight for theirs. When Malcolm X says this, Baldwin writes, referring to their conversation on *The Open Mind*, “he is speaking the truth,” a truth that Baldwin refuses to deny, even if he disagrees with the conclusions. They discussed this charge of violence on a panel with C. Eric Lincoln and the conservative commenta-

tor George C. Schuyler. Elijah Muhammad saw the program, leading him to invite Baldwin to his home that summer.⁵⁸ When Elijah Muhammad mentions having seen Baldwin on television, he says that Baldwin was “not yet brainwashed and was trying to become [him]self.”⁵⁹

Using the same language that he does to describe the sit-in movement versus the Black Muslims, Baldwin talks about his anxiety over the meeting—because of the tension between the two “poles” in himself, love and rage. That same summer, Studs Terkel interviewed Baldwin, asking whether he is for or against violence. Baldwin pauses, and then responds by talking about two movements happening simultaneously, Dr. King’s and Malcolm X’s.

“There is a great ambivalence in myself. Yet at the same time, I don’t know, let me put it in another way. Am I for or against violence? It is not relevant. There will be violence, there will be violence in Birmingham. It has been intolerable for 100 years.” The “black Muslim speaker,” he says, is a “counterweight to this history. The white world can’t do anything about it. Until the white world is willing to face its history.”⁶⁰

On *The Open Mind* television program, Malcolm X is repeatedly asked to comment on the Nation of Islam’s advocacy of racial segregation and nonpassivity—but when he explains that violence and racism have policed the color line throughout American history, he is shouted down and accused of advocating violence and racism, as he would be on other television programs during this time.⁶¹ Baldwin backs up Malcolm X, even while rejecting Nation of Islam theology for its embrace of racial essentialism, racial segregation, and racial supremacy (“and its deadly conclusions”).⁶² Baldwin’s writings and public words repeatedly evoke how Black Muslim theology held up a mirror to white racism and white racial supremacy—by calling for a separate nation and a separate economy, but also by identifying white men as “devils” and God as black. Black Muslim theology challenged the epistemological underpinnings of white racism by subverting and inverting its most basic assumptions about the moral and racial superiority of whites. “What the Muslim movement is doing,” Baldwin says on *The Open Mind*, “is simply taking the equipment, or the history really, of white people and turning it against them.”⁶³

Despite Baldwin’s extensive engagement with Black Muslim thought, his clear tributes to the “truth” of their ideas, and his testimony to the “power” of their speech, critical treatments of *The Fire Next Time* emphasize his rejection of Black Muslim thought. Kevin Birmingham writes about “an ‘age of revolution’ that lured young men and women to the nation of Islam,” abetted by the promise of decolonization in Africa, “and this, Baldwin felt, was the corruption of identity . . . the monster gestating in Baldwin and birthed in *The Fire Next Time*.”⁶⁴ Yet *The Fire Next*

Time reflects not on Black Muslims as monsters but on how Black Muslim theology developed a language for articulating the monstrosity of white racism, partly through the trope of “white devils.” This rhetoric inverted white racism, holding up a mirror to its logic in public discourse, a discourse that frightened and repelled white audiences. Baldwin called this hypocrisy “ignorance,” a lack of “self-examination,” and “fleeing from reality.”⁶⁵ He repeatedly speaks of the willful ignorance of whites (Kenneth Clark interview) or their inability to see themselves as they truly are (*Nobody Knows My Name*).⁶⁶ This mirror held up to white racism was one of the Black Muslims’ most powerful discursive tools, a tool Baldwin bends toward his own purposes. He tries on Black Muslim modes of argumentation, affirming the truth of their ideas even while disagreeing with fundamental tenets of their creed. In May 1963, just after *The Fire Next Time*’s publication in January, Kenneth Clark interviewed Baldwin for a television program, “The Negro and the American Promise.” A transcript of this interview opens the first page of James Baldwin’s Federal Bureau of Investigation file. Filmed only hours after Baldwin, Clark, and other black leaders met with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, in the interview Baldwin speaks deliberately and forcefully about how white people have “deluded themselves so long that they really don’t think I’m human . . . which makes them moral monsters.”⁶⁷

Letters, Names, and Self-Authoring

Baldwin roots identity in questions of naming, influenced by the politics of Black Muslim representation, but also in questions of letters, titles, and authorship. In the summer of 1961, Baldwin republished “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood” in *Nobody Knows My Name*, the title becoming “East River, Downtown: Postscript to a Letter from Harlem,” a companion piece to “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem,” first published in *Esquire* in July 1960, which vividly describes Baldwin’s childhood and how people are kept “in their place” through a lack of spatial, economic, and social mobility. It returns to something Baldwin reiterates throughout his writing: that you can speak of the truth of your story, life, world, reality only from a distance. He repeats this motif in writings and interviews during this period—that he listened only to Bessie Smith while writing in Istanbul and France. She was “too close to home,” and he needed distance to reclaim her. These exiles and journeys serve a certain mnemonic function, stories he tells and retells to help him “invent, maintain, and renew identity.”⁶⁸ Baldwin also aims to explain the power of Black Muslim thought, the power of Africa on the Harlem imaginary (and Asia on the Nation of Islam)—and the claiming and reclaiming of other origins for that cultural imaginary. This renaming of the essay is key, shifting the

burden of representation from an anonymous “Negro” and a racialized “Negro mood” to a more specific relationship of power suggested by the spatial divisions and economic inequalities between uptown and downtown, Harlem and Fifth Avenue, Africa and Europe, the Congo and the United Nations, black and white. Baldwin deftly reclaims the language of the title identifying the demonstrations as a “Negro” problem, reframing the unrest as a “private, domestic, and international” problem, but also of political, linguistic, and aesthetic representation.⁶⁹

Baldwin critiques the Nation of Islam for having invented a heritage and a history, though he recognizes the power of its origin story. In their radio discussion, Malcolm X responds by talking about a heritage forcibly stripped from its people(s) and a lost “mother tongue.” Elijah Muhammad, says Malcolm X, gave the black man in America knowledge of his existence prior to coming here through a process of (re)signification in the Nation:

The man that calls himself a Negro . . . is still a slave but he is wearing his slave master’s name the name that was given to him during slavery. He is speaking the language of the man who made him a slave because he has no knowledge of his own tongue. He only knows his own history as taught him by his former slave master who purposely hid from him his *own* history to make him believe that he was an inferior being before being brought here.⁷⁰

Baldwin disagrees, though, about what this heritage is—American, African, Asian, or Islamic. But by counterposing Black Muslims alongside the black church through preaching, music, and language, Baldwin speaks to a deeper historical truth of how African religion, including Islam, informed the practice of black religion in America, as well as the black aesthetic tradition. The question of identity, Baldwin says, “this is where all the questions are.”⁷¹

The title of “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind” in *The Fire Next Time* speaks to these questions of naming, authorship, and self-authoring. Baldwin situates the essay in the epistolary genealogy of his other essays, but the letter is now from the place that is himself. Like “Postscript,” *The Fire Next Time* adds something beyond the letter, the “script,” and the written word, and that is another tradition of recording history, a black aesthetics articulated through “sweet wild hymns.” *The Fire Next Time* elaborates letters with sounds, epistles with hymns, making the spiritual “Down at the Cross” the main title of “A Letter from a Region in My Mind,” the lyrics “My Dungeon Shook” the main title of “A Letter to My Nephew,” and the spiritual *The Fire Next Time* the title of the book. In “A Letter to My Nephew,” Baldwin situates this in a genealogy, “a long line of great poets. . . . One of them said, ‘The very time I thought

I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off.” He writes about how his nephew was supposed to die in the ghetto, “never being allowed to go beyond and behind the white man’s definition, by never being allowed to spell your proper name.”⁷²

“Down at the Cross” is quoted in the book’s epigraph but is also threaded through the text and the argument, specifically with respect to naming and origins. Baldwin explains its significance through Black Muslim denunciations of the assignation *Negro*, echoing Malcolm X’s argument in their radio discussion that *Negro* is a slave name from the Spanish word for “black.”⁷³

The Muslims refer to the Negro as “the so-called American Negro” and substitute for the names inherited from slavery the letter “X.” It is a fact that every American Negro bears a name that originally belonged to the white man whose chattel he was. I am called Baldwin because I was either sold by my African tribe or kidnapped out of it into the hands of a white Christian named Baldwin, who forced me to kneel at the foot of the cross.⁷⁴

Here Baldwin raises the specter of the suppression of the preslave past, the imposition of white names and white definitions as an emblem of ownership, and the bending of Christianity in the service of slavery. He weaves “Down at the Cross” into this history, reaching for the power of music to convey what Gilroy calls “the politics of transfiguration.” These politics are “sung and sung about,” writes Gilroy, “because words . . . which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth.”⁷⁵

Nobody Knows My Name is titled after Baldwin’s 1959 essay in the *Partisan Review*, “Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South,” also in the epistolary genre, charting what we would later call “the vast and unmapped geography of himself.”⁷⁶ The essays, he writes, are a “private logbook” dealing with “the question of color” that “especially in this country, operates to hide the grave questions of the self.”⁷⁷ These epistles are intensely personal, autobiographical, and familiar dispatches from seemingly distant lands, although some of these lands are so close to home, uptown, downtown, and from “a region in my mind.” They seek out primal scenes, origins, and places, as Baldwin returns to his youth in Harlem, to his origins in the South, and farther, to Africa. Along with white devils and scenes of rape, Baldwin sees red earth drenched in blood. In “A Letter from the South,” Baldwin describes approaching “the rust-red earth of Georgia” in an airplane, envisioning a scene of lynching: “I could not suppress the thought that this earth had acquired its color from the blood that had dripped down from these trees. My mind was filled with the image of a black man, younger than I, perhaps, or my age,

hanging from a tree, while white men watched him and cut his sex from him with a knife.”⁷⁸ The scene speaks of the dismembered Emmett Till, whose death Baldwin dramatized in his 1964 play *Blues for Mister Charlie*, writing, “It’s that damn white God that’s been lynching us and burning us and castrating us and raping our women and robbing us of everything that makes a man a man for all these hundreds of years.”⁷⁹ Baldwin returns to the image of the blood-soaked earth in “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” describing Elijah Muhammad’s power as coming from having nothing to lose. “Elijah, I should imagine, has had nothing to lose since the day he saw his father’s blood rush out—rush down, and splash, so the legend has it, down through the leaves of a tree, on him.”⁸⁰ The power of this primordial image, of the earth stained by blood, of bearing witness to racial terror, is the primal scene of torture.⁸¹ Baldwin, like Nicole Sealey’s poem “Even the Gods,” situates the Nation of Islam origins in this moment of lynching, castration, bloodshed, and racial terror.⁸² Baldwin relates this legend (Elijah Muhammad did witness lynchings in his youth, but not of his father); Nation of Islam theology relates another primal scene of torture, the “making of the devil” Yakub who murdered black babies when they were born, diluting the blood of the “original black man.” In *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, Edward E. Curtis analyzes this origin story as a black theodicy “grounded in a mythological view of history that explained the fall of black civilization, the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, and the practice of Christian religion among slaves and their descendants.”⁸³ Recounting the story of Yakub in *Message to the Blackman in America*, Elijah Muhammad writes that “the so-called Negroes have not only given free labor, but have given their lives on the soil of their masters, all over the earth.”⁸⁴

Baldwin calls the title *Nobody Knows My Name* a “bitter title” and “a warning to my country” in his interview with Studs Terkel in July 1961, when the book was published.⁸⁵ Asked why he chose that title, Baldwin says (gesturing to Ralph Ellison): “You’re invisible—what white people see when they look at you . . . is what white people have invested you with. . . . You represent a level of experience that white people deny.” Their conversation probes the question of identity, with Baldwin reflecting: “You are told in America that being black is a terrible, terrible thing—which I couldn’t believe. In order to survive this you have to really dig down into yourself and recreate yourself according to no image that exists in America. You have to have to decide who you are.” Terkel repeats his words like a refrain: “Decide who you are.”⁸⁶ At the very end of the interview, Terkel asks one last question: “James Baldwin, who are you now?” Baldwin sighs deeply and says, “I may not be able to tell you who I am, but I am discovering who I am not.” He sighs again and says, “I want

to be an honest man, and I want to be a good writer.”⁸⁷ *The Fire Next Time* replays this exchange in Baldwin’s conversation with Elijah Muhammad that took place only a few weeks after the Terkel interview, also in Chicago. Like Terkel, Elijah Muhammad asks Baldwin, “And what are you now?” Baldwin relays his famous answer: “‘I? Now? Nothing. . . . I’m a writer . . . I don’t anyway,’ I said, finally, ‘think about it a great deal.’” Elijah turns to others in the room and says, “I think he ought to think about it *all* the deal.”⁸⁸ Baldwin is swept up in the religious euphoria of Elijah Muhammad’s words but then comes crashing down to earth in a startling anticlimax of existential nothingness. The reality is that Baldwin clearly did think—and write—about it *all* the deal, for his writings were already extensive reflections on the question of who and what he was.

When Baldwin answers “nothing,” he speaks of refusing the naming process called for in the Nation of Islam, but he also speaks of the negation and annihilation suggested by the X. This is what Moten calls the “hole in the signifier” and Chow a “trajectory of self-recognition from which the possibility of self-regard (or self-respect) has, nonetheless, been removed in advance.”⁸⁹ In that moment, Baldwin names himself “a writer” and talks about “taking himself seriously as a writer,” drawing on Elijah Muhammad’s own authority to which he repeatedly refers. Toward the close of “Letter from a Region of My Mind,” Baldwin talks about “this past, the Negro’s past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation . . . this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful.” The man that survives this “fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy” his manhood, Baldwin writes, knows something “about himself and human life that no school on earth—and, indeed, no church—can teach. He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced . . . to hear the meaning behind the words.”⁹⁰

As Baldwin reflects on the power of black liberation theology, the moment becomes one of reckoning. It is the eye of the apocalyptic language of the essay, a singular moment of quiet, a center, a refusal, and a celebration. It is a moment of self-authorization and authorial self-definition. But Baldwin is not nothing (like Odysseus calling himself “Nobody,” Socrates saying “I know I know nothing,” or Marc Lamont Hill’s *Nobody*). It is written, like Baldwin’s other epistles, as a reflection on a journey.⁹¹ Writing about the “aesthetics of the black Atlantic,” Gilroy connects autobiographical writing to the process of self-liberation, analyzing the writings of Frederick Douglass, “generally remembered for the quality and passion of his political oratory.”⁹² These artistic forms are not something new; they are not “simply the inauguration of a new and vital literary genre.” Rather,

this distinctive pattern of self-creation is . . . the initiation and reproduction of a distinctive political perspective in which autopoiesis articulates with poetics to form a stance, a style, and a philosophical mood that have been repeated and reworked in the political culture of the black Atlantic ever since. . . . They develop this line of enquiry by seeking to answer the meta-physical question “Who am I?”⁹³

Hymns, Floods, and Fires

In Baldwin’s well-known essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” he discusses the problem of developing a language, an epistemology, a system of signs through which the subaltern can speak without trafficking in stereotypes, romanticizing slavery, turning its horrors into spectacle, or reproducing “the terms of subordination guaranteed by that discourse.”⁹⁴ When he writes about developing a language of truth about the black experience, he talks about music, about Bessie Smith, jazz, and the blues: “I had told myself so many lies I had really buried myself. What I had been like in the beginning. To recreate Negro speech. The cadence. A question of the beat. And Bessie had the beat.”⁹⁵ When Baldwin meets Elijah Muhammad, he wonders what it would sound like if Elijah Muhammad could sing, a comment that rings strangely but that gestures to the hymns, blues, and spirituals that run through Baldwin’s writings. When Baldwin visits Elijah Muhammad he describes “the quietness, the ease, the peace, the taste,” repeating the sensation of peace, connecting it to his childhood: “The sunlight came into the room with the peacefulness one remembers from rooms in one’s early childhood—a sunlight encountered later only in one’s dreams.”⁹⁶ He talks about his “marvelous smile,” his disciples’ joy in his presence, their great freedom, their loving but respectful attitude. And he is taken back to his childhood (like with the voice of his pastor): “How his smile promised to take the burden of my life off my shoulders.” Here, Baldwin quotes the evangelical gospel singer Blind Willie Johnson in italics: “*Take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there,*” echoing the lyrics of “Down at the Cross.” A common current of pain—and of blood and suffering—joins the Christian and Muslim traditions of black religion. And he sees that “the central quality in Elijah’s face is pain . . . pain so old and deep and black that it becomes personal and particular only when he smiles.”⁹⁷

In his impressive *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, Ed Pavlič describes Baldwin’s use of song as a lyrical mode enabling him to “do things with language possible nowhere else.”⁹⁸ Black religion and the cadences and rhythms of black speech and music provide the backstory and the backbeat for narrating Baldwin’s epiphany about who he is. In *The Fire Next Time*, he opens his discussion of the Black Muslims with Farrakhan’s song “The White Man’s Heaven Is the Black Man’s Hell.”⁹⁹ Recorded in 1960

with his brother Alvan X when Farrakhan was known as Louis X, the song begins with questions about names and gives answers that speak of loss. Evoking Chow's "epidermalization of naming and calling," Louis X sings: "Why are we called Negroes? Why are we deaf, dumb, and blind? . . . Why are we in this condition? Stripped of our name, our language, our culture, our God, and our religion."¹⁰⁰ Public Enemy reinterpreted this song in their 1994 "White Heaven/Black Hell" that begins with the lyrics "Black history, White lie."¹⁰¹ Farrakhan sings of the white man's colonial invasions of Asia, "raping, robbing, and murdering everything in his path." Baldwin gives his own account of the song, saying "the song is true, and it has been true for as long as white men have ruled the world."¹⁰² He writes that the "American dream" became "something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the private, domestic, and international levels"—two years before the March on Washington and King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and long before James H. Cone's analysis of Malcolm X's theology of the American nightmare (vs. King's dream).¹⁰³ Farrakhan would attest to this truth in a different way: "Music, like truth, is the essence of my life. . . . They don't fully know the soul of a man—and I think that can be expressed through music."¹⁰⁴

Baldwin ultimately rejects Black Muslim racial and ethnic essentialism as a writer, but also on historical terms. He carefully considers their ideas but criticizes their theology of racial superiority, remarking in his joint interview with Malcolm X: "In order to deal with the rest of the world, that I will not need to feel superior to them, but simply be a part of them. I'd like to see a world where there are no blacks and there are no whites, where it does not matter. As long as it does matter, it doesn't matter who is wearing the shoe. The confusion will be great and the bloodshed will be great."¹⁰⁵ He returns to this concept in *The Fire Next Time*, calling the glorification of one race over the other "a recipe for murder." Instead, he hopes for "transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars."¹⁰⁶ Baldwin distanced himself from the language of nationality and national belonging connected with race and ethnic identity, the lure of ethnic particularism and nationalism, calling for release from the "tyranny of [the] mirror. All of us know . . . that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits one there."¹⁰⁷

When Studs Terkel asks Baldwin "Who are you now?," Baldwin responds by saying he wants to be a good writer, he wants to be honest, and says, "You need to just play it by ear and pray for rain," foreshadowing the redemptive tenor, lyrical imagination, and eschatological warnings in *The Fire Next Time*.¹⁰⁸ Drowning and floods are motifs in Baldwin's writings during this time. In Baldwin's *Another Country*, published between *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time*, Rufus commits

suicide by drowning, partly out of despair of his inability to break free from the mirror of the double consciousness cultivated by racism. Lyrics from Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues" intersperse the moments leading up to the climactic scene—when Rufus jumps from the George Washington Bridge. "There's thousands of people ain't got no place to go . . . cause my house fell down and I can't live there no more."¹⁰⁹ Bessie Smith permeates Baldwin's essays in *Nobody Knows My Name*: he gives her credit in "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American" for helping him to remember things that he had buried very deep, things he had heard, seen, and felt.¹¹⁰ In another essay, he favorably compares Richard Wright's "The Man Who Saw the Flood" to Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues"—and Terkel plays this song to open his 1961 interview with Baldwin. The song is associated with the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 that displaced more than two hundred thousand African Americans, turning the Great Migration to the North into a flood; it was also the reason Wright's family's migrated from Memphis to Chicago in 1927 and Elijah Muhammad's from Georgia to Michigan.¹¹¹ These images find their resonance today in Katrina as an emblem of great destruction as much as great racism.

The tyranny of racism—as a death by drowning in the mirror—provides the conceptual key to the title *The Fire Next Time*. The title is taken from the hymn Baldwin quotes to open the book and to close it: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!" If we drown in the mirror of racism—or in mirroring racisms—then there will be no redemption, only apocalyptic fire. Baldwin poses the question: "Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?"¹¹² One of the most famous lines of *The Fire Next Time* and a critique of integration, the question came from his earlier discussion of the Black Muslims in *Nobody Knows My Name*. In the earlier essay, Baldwin cites "one prominent Negro, who is *not* a Muslim" as saying: "I am not at all sure . . . I *want* to be integrated into a burning house." The words are Lorraine Hansberry's, spoken in a January 1, 1961, radio symposium, "The Negro Writer in America," with Baldwin and Langston Hughes.¹¹³ The line would go on to have great currency. Malcolm X frequently used the burning house image in his speeches, saying that if the white man is "not ready to clean his house up, he shouldn't have a house. It should catch on fire and burn down."¹¹⁴ Harry Belafonte's memoir, *My Song* (2011), repeats the line, remembering Martin Luther King Jr. as saying it just days before his assassination. King confided in Belafonte: "We have fought hard and long for integration . . . but I have come to believe that we are integrating into a burning house."¹¹⁵ The news media and popular press have widely circulated the comment, attributing it to King rather than to Baldwin, or even to Hansberry. Sources like NPR, the *Los Angeles*

Sentinel, and Cornell West in *Restoring Hope: Conversations on the Future of Black America* all quote the line as King's.¹¹⁶ The image has come full circle, back to the Nation of Islam's newspaper the *Final Call*, with Jineea Butler writing in 2014: "Burning house? What was the burning house Dr. King was referring to? Does the burning house resemble Ferguson, Mo.?"¹¹⁷ Baldwin himself reiterated this line in the immediate aftermath of King's assassination. Asked about "integrating into a burning house" in an interview, he bitterly remarks: "I think Stokely's right when he says that integration is another word, you know, the latest kind of euphemism for white supremacy. No, I don't want to be integrated into this house or any other house, especially not this burning house. I don't want to become . . . like you. You, the white people. I'd rather die than become what most white people in this country have become."¹¹⁸ The fire, burning, and punishment for past sins are an apocalyptic "warning to my country" about moral retribution "when this world's all on fire," as the song says. "If we do not end the racial nightmare," Baldwin says, "the fulfillment of that prophecy . . . is upon us."¹¹⁹ The ongoing specter of racial terror speaks to that nightmare.

Baldwin situates himself in the "prophetic stream" of the black radical intellectual tradition. In his official biography, everywhere he is referred to as a "prophet."¹²⁰ In *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, Anthony Bogues describes four dimensions of this "prophetic stream," which fit Baldwin's authorial voice. The first dimension is social criticism as a redemptive discourse arguing for ending colonial and racial oppression. "This is a politics of the world upside down, which eschews the standard political forms and language of political modernity."¹²¹ Second, these prophets narrate a different story of the past, drawing on biblical exegesis and "indigenous knowledge systems" (the "so-called American Negro's original religion, Islam")—though what that indigenous heritage is becomes a point of contention between Baldwin and Malcolm X. The third feature is the "creative usage of language to describe social conditions and affirm their humanity":

The word—*la parole*—becomes a weapon . . . beating against the walls of oppression as well as an "illocutionary force." Language is a central feature for this stream as it reorders meanings. Used extensively, the different meanings of words contribute to an alternative political discourse. This discourse refigures political and religious languages, integrating them to create a new political grammar.¹²²

The final dimension is a "counter symbolic world and order" that "overturns the hegemonic racist or colonial order." It is nothing less, Bogues writes, than "a battle for human validation."¹²³

Epilogue: Remembering

Baldwin's discussion of the familiar tone of Black Muslim speech—as a skin color, musical timber, linguistic inflection, mood, or emotion—anticipates later scholarly arguments by theorists like James H. Cone and Sherman A. Jackson about black religion, intersecting liberation theologies, and mutual struggles for racial justice. Baldwin reminds us, in the new Taschen edition of *The Fire Next Time* and Raoul Peck's film *I Am Not Your Negro*, that much has been silenced in both official and popular histories of what is now called the “civil rights era,” effectively writing the Black Muslim contribution—and voice—out of that period.¹²⁴ Baldwin compels us to remember that these two movements, despite their tensions, worked contrapuntally to address the problem of black suffering in tandem. To leave out Black Muslims is to erase the story of an indigenous American Islam, a history that goes back to the nation's very foundations.

Baldwin takes his early formation as a youth preacher, wipes away his disillusionment and doubts, and comes in to his own vocation as the prophetic author of his own epistles, gospels urging us to repent before it is too late, for the sake of the soul of America. He interprets the signs of the Black Muslims as a warning, imploring us to avert an apocalyptic fate by embracing love and reconciliation now. And he himself becomes the emissary of the human, the intermediary between two poles of black mobilization, the interlocutor between black and white, tempering rage with love and terror with beauty. As Baldwin affirms the truth of Black Muslim speech and language, his letter becomes the hymn “The Fire Next Time” with all the apocalyptic retribution, vengeance, reckoning, accounting, and reparations promised by the biblical and Pentecostal tradition, articulated with a new fire. Baldwin calls for the truth of the black American experience to be not just recognized but sung.

In portraying Black Muslim language as succeeding the promise of the black church, Baldwin draws our attention to another truth that he touches on but does not fully excavate. The black church was founded on the smoldering ruins of African religion, including Islam, devastated on American soil by the slave trade. The language of the Nation of Islam did not just emerge in dialectical relation to the black church; the black church also emerged out of an earlier, a priori “Asiatic” Islam that the lost-found Nation of Islam references as its true origins (an Islam that itself bears traces of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament). It is the truth of this history that the Black Muslim preacher asks us to recognize and to remember.

When *The Fire Next Time* was first published in January 1963, Baldwin embarked on a tour of the South, photographed by Steve Schapiro. On May 24, *Life* magazine published the images of Baldwin's stops in New

Orleans, Durham, and Greensboro—the day of Baldwin’s meeting with Bobby Kennedy.¹²⁵ The Taschen edition juxtaposes the two “poles” of black mobilization, with side-by-side photographs of two spaces emblematic of the student sit-in movement and the Black Muslim movement, respectively, both in Durham, North Carolina. The first shows Baldwin in front of the “Colored Entrance” of the Royal Ice Cream Parlor, site of one of the first sit-in protests (in 1957); the second shows Baldwin in front of an early Nation of Islam mosque, Muhammad’s Mosque no. 34 (figs. 1–2).¹²⁶ The physical establishments of the Royal Ice Cream and Muhammad’s Mosque no. 34 are now destroyed—two powerful monuments to struggles for racial justice of our era, erased. The Schapiro photographs are some of the few existing images of these two landmarks. A third Durham photograph shows Baldwin holding an abandoned child, in the shadow of a blazing image of a white Jesus, an image that later became the cover of *The Fire Next Time* (fig. 3). This implicit critique of the racial politics of representation, and problems of social and economic inequalities, speaks today to the ongoing violence against black children that mobilized #BlackLivesMatter. It is also a tragic coda to the question, “Whose little boy are you?”

Later that year, Medgar Evers was assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi, and the four girls perished in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1965, Malcolm X would be assassinated, and in 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. With Dylann Roof, Katrina, Ferguson, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and #BlackLivesMatter, the nightmare goes on seemingly without justice or retribution. This fulfillment of Baldwin’s prophecy attests to the reasons—and necessity—for his revival. The assassination of Malcolm X helped give birth to the Black Power and black arts movements as LeRoi Jones, a founder of the black arts movement, converted to Islam, becoming Imamu Amiri Baraka. Baraka would pay the ultimate tribute to Baldwin in his eulogy, writing in the *New York Times* that “Jimmy’s voice, as much as Dr. King’s or Malcolm X’s, helped shepherd and guide us toward black liberation. Let us hold him in our hearts and minds. Let us make him part of our invincible black souls, the intelligence of our transcendence. . . . For Jimmy was God’s black revolutionary mouth.”¹²⁷



Figure 1. Baldwin in front of Muhammad's Mosque no. 34 in Durham, North Carolina, now destroyed. Photograph by Steve Schapiro, courtesy of Fahey/Klein Gallery. First published in *Life*; republished in James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (2017), 260.



Figure 2. Baldwin in front of Royal Ice Cream Parlor in Durham, North Carolina, site of one of the first sit-in protests (in 1957), now destroyed. Photograph by Steve Schapiro, courtesy of Fahey/Klein Gallery. First published in *Life*; republished in James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (2017), 261.



Figure 3. Baldwin holding an abandoned child in Durham, North Carolina, under the gaze of a white Jesus. This photograph graced the cover of several later editions of *The Fire Next Time*. Photograph by Steve Schapiro, courtesy of Fahey/Klein Gallery. Republished in James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (2017), 252–53.

Notes

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1. Nyong’o, “Unburdening Representation,” 70.

2. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 69.

3. Baldwin, “Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins”; Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 68. The term *Black Muslim* is contested. Malcolm X argued that it was an unwanted term introduced in C. Eric Lincoln’s book *Black Muslims in America* (*Autobiography*, 284). *Sapelo Square*, the online journal on Black Muslims, uses the term to refer to “African-descended Muslims . . . at the intersection of three major geographies: the African diaspora, the United States, and the Transnational Muslim community.” Like *Sapelo Square*, this article strives to “intervene in the marginalization and erasure of Black Muslims in the public square” by placing “Black Muslims at the center” (*Sapelo Square*, “About Us”). The aim is to contest not just their exclusion and invisibility in mainstream discourse but also the suppression of Black Muslim ideas and theologies that challenge white racism and white supremacy. As Edward Curtis observes, “Even if African-Descended Muslims do not have one way of practicing Islam, they often live as Muslims in societies that are, to a greater or lesser degree, racist. . . . This is true not only in the part of the world shaped by the Atlantic slave trade but also in all the places that were caught up in a world dominated and constituted by the European imperium” (*Call of Bilal*, 13). In the 1950s and 1960s, *Black*

Muslim referred mainly to the adherents of the Nation of Islam and the followers of Elijah Muhammad. With the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 and the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975, the semantics of the assignation *Black Muslim* has become more varied.

4. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 73, 74.
5. Alim, *Roc the Mic Right*, 22.
6. Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis*, 208; Lamont Hill and Ladson-Billings, *Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life*, 121; Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool*, 29.
7. Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 125–26; Nyong’o, “Unburdening Representation,” 73; Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 240.
8. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion that subaltern speech “can only produce the terms of subordination,” Tavia Nyong’o argues that “there is always a space of intervention . . . a hairline fracture” that brings together political and aesthetic representation (“Unburdening Representation,” 72).
9. Malcolm X, Speech at Harlem Freedom Rally.
10. King, “Durham’s Black Muslims”; Horton, “Crowds Hear Muslim Debate.”
11. Baldwin, *Remember This House*. The executors of Baldwin’s estate gave exclusive access to Peck for the purposes of the film.
12. Miller, “Lost and . . . Found?,” 671.
13. Baldwin “manipulates the aesthetics and politics of aurality in order to deepen his critical reflections on racial antagonism and resistance . . . thematically and formally incorporat[ing] sound as a means of envisioning alternative political possibilities.” Mathes, *Imagine the Sound*, 166.
14. Alim, “360 Degreez of Black Art,” 18.
15. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (2017), 17. Two exceptions are Herb Boyd’s chapter on Malcolm X in his biography of Baldwin (*Baldwin’s Harlem*, 65–86) and Lynn Orilla Scott’s chapter on Baldwin and the civil rights movement, in which she discusses Malcolm X (“Challenging the American Conscience”).
16. Michael Eric Dyson’s *What Truth Sounds Like*, which deals extensively with Baldwin during this period, does not mention his engagement with Black Muslims, despite Baldwin’s repeated appeals to the truth of their words.
17. Nyong’o, “Unburdening Representation,” 71; Baldwin, *Devil Finds Work*, 103.
18. Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 268.
19. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 71.
20. Two remarkable exceptions to this are McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 84–124; and Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon*.
21. Spillers, “Fabrics of History,” 28, as quoted in Colbert, “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” 56; Kornegay, *Queering of Black Theology*.
22. Du Bois, “Negro Nation within a Nation”; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 5.
23. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 67, 69.
24. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense of heteroglossia, Edward W. Said’s sense of harmonizing seemingly opposing world views, and Gilroy’s sense of a resistance discourse. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 273, 279, 291; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 78–79, 200; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 32, 43, 51.
25. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 32.
26. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (2017), 67; referencing Revelation 20:3.
27. Chow, *Not like a Native Speaker*, 8, 11.
28. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 67, 69.
29. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 45.
30. “As you know the bible is written in symbols, parables and this serpent or

snake is the symbol that is used to hide the real identity of the one that this actually was . . . the white man.” Wallace and Lomax, *Hate That Hate Produced*. The transcript of the report can be found in the Federal Bureau of Investigation file on the Nation of Islam.

31. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 28. See Nyong’o’s discussion of the simulacrum in his essay on the politics of representation in “Unburdening Representation,” 77.

32. Nyong’o, “Unburdening Representation,” 77. Though Nyong’o describes this as an embracing of inauthenticity, Jackson describes it as enabling a “truer, more authentic ‘black self’” (*Islam and the Blackamerican*, 28). When the Nation of Islam came into contact with immigrant Islam, the Nation was seen as the “inferior imitation” or copy that Chow discusses; the Nation of Islam was continually identified as un-Islamic, something that recent scholarship—and cultural production—eloquently challenges. See Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion*; and Michael Muhammad Knight, *Blue-Eyed Devil*.

33. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 24. In this passage, Jackson actually paraphrases Baldwin to emphasize the particular sociohistorical experience of black Americans: “Negroes do not, strictly or legally, exist in any other country” (Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* [1993], 25).

34. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 31.

35. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 170–72; Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 39, 40.

36. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, 42; Frazier, *Negro Church in America*, 77–79.

37. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 70.

38. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 28, 29, 63. In “James Baldwin Discusses ‘Nobody Knows My Name,’” interviewer Studs Terkel asks Baldwin if the title is related to being called “boy.”

39. Fred Moten defines idiom (via Jacques Derrida) as what is proper to the self, as “prop(ri)e(r)ty,” what is “in principle inimitable and inexpressible. The idiom is the proper” (*In the Break*, 266n37).

40. See Nyong’o’s discussion of rejecting “coercive mimeticism” in the practice of representation in “Unburdening Representation,” 75–76. “Why am I who you say I am?” and “I is another” are Nyong’o’s words.

41. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 78.

42. Southern Poverty Law Center, “Nation of Islam,” lists the Nation of Islam as a “designated hate group” for its antigay and anti-Semitic rhetoric.

43. Kornegay, *Queering of Black Theology*, 10; Jen and McMahon, “Timely Politics.”

44. Moten, *In the Break*, 201.

45. Moten, *In the Break*, 179. Also see Moten’s discussion of Baldwin’s idea of “beauty” in “Three Epistles on Race in America.”

46. Moten, *In the Break*, 44–45, 265–66n37.

47. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 75.

48. Stevenson, “Speech in the United Nations Security Council.”

49. Marable, *Malcolm X*, 189–90. Maya Angelou, who met with Malcolm X after these demonstrations that they both took part in, described him in terms of fire as “a hot desert storm . . . his hair was the color of burning embers and his eyes pierced” (quoted in Marable, *Malcolm X*, 189–90).

50. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 79.

51. Baldwin, “James Baldwin Discusses ‘Nobody Knows My Name.’”

52. Sonia Sanchez interview in Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize II*. This interview is also included in Orlando Bagwell's documentary *Malcolm X*.

53. Hasan X, comment on Malcolm X and Baldwin, "Malcolm X—Debate with James Baldwin."

54. Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins." Baldwin revisited—and analyzed—these conversations in his later *No Name in the Street*, reflecting on the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr.

55. Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins."

56. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 69.

57. Baldwin, "Black Muslims in America"; Schuyler, "Black Muslims in America."

58. Marable, *Malcolm X*, 188; Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 58.

59. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 64–65. "Elijah mentioned having seen me on television and said that it seemed to him that I was not yet brainwashed and was trying to become myself. . . . I suppose I *would* like to become myself, whatever that may mean, but I knew that Elijah's meaning and mine were not the same. I said yes, I was trying to be me, but I did not know how to say more than that."

60. Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses 'Nobody Knows My Name.'"

61. See, e.g., Hurlbut, "Malcolm X Interview."

62. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 76.

63. Baldwin, "Black Muslims in America."

64. Birmingham, "'History's Ass Pocket,'" 151–52. His language reiterates almost verbatim the language of Lincoln in *Black Muslims in America*: "The lower-class Negro is ripe for the lure of black nationalism. He is proud to rediscover himself as a Black Man, linked to the great and venerable civilizations of the 'single black continent' of Afro-Asia. He is grateful for a mystique, especially one dignified as a religion, that rationalizes his resentment and hatred as spiritual virtues in a cosmic war of good against evil. And he is jubilant at his new vision of the future—a future not of racial equality, for which he believes the white man has shown himself unfit, but of black supremacy. For 'black,' to the black nationalist, is a quality and symbol of all that is glorious, triumphant, and divine" (48–49).

65. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 10; Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 100, 107; Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins."

66. Clark interviewed Baldwin in Baldwin, "The Negro and the American Promise." In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin writes, "The reason it is important—of the utmost importance—for white people, here, to see the Negroes as people like themselves is that white people will not, otherwise, be able to see themselves as they are" (75). This point is reiterated in the section titled "My Dungeon Shook" in *Fire Next Time* (1993): "We, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it" (10).

67. Baldwin, "The Negro and the American Promise."

68. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 198.

69. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 89.

70. Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins."

71. Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins."

72. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 9. "Letter from a Region of My Mind" was originally published in the *New Yorker*, November 9, 1962; "Letter to My Nephew" in the *Progressive*, January 1, 1962; and *Fire Next Time* by Dial Press in January 1963. In *Fire Next Time*, the *Progressive* article is retitled "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" and "Letter from a Region of My Mind" is retitled "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind."

73. Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins."
74. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 84.
75. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 37.
76. Baldwin, *Just above My Head*, 308.
77. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, xiii.
78. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 100. The image of "the red hills of Georgia" appeared in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, with a vision of reconciliation: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" (4).
79. Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, 4.
80. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 76.
81. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 32.
82. Sealey, *Ordinary Beast*, 54.
83. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion*, 11.
84. Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, 104.
85. Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses 'Nobody Knows My Name.'"
86. Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses 'Nobody Knows My Name.'"
87. Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses 'Nobody Knows My Name.'"
88. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 70–71.
89. Moten, *In the Break*, 173; Chow, *Not like a Native Speaker*, 6.
90. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 98. The black radical aesthetic tradition, Moten argues, is not only the site of recitations of terror and violation but "an aural content that infuses and transforms (our dominant understandings of) primality" (*In the Break*, 179). Also see Moten's discussion of Baldwin's idea of "beauty" in "Three Epistles on Race in America."
91. It was originally supposed to be an essay on "new nations" in Africa and Israel but ended being an autobiographical essay on black Christian and black Muslim speech and theology, finished in Istanbul. Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 189–90; Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade*, 15.
92. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 58.
93. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 70.
94. Nyong'o, "Unburdening Representation," 72.
95. Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses 'Nobody Knows My Name.'"
96. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 61–62.
97. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 64.
98. Pavlić, *Who Can Afford to Improvise?*, 7.
99. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 45.
100. Louis X, "A Moslem Sings: A White Man's Heaven Is a Black Man's Hell."
101. Public Enemy, "White Heaven/Black Hell."
102. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 45.
103. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 89. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*. E. Kornegay has a masterful analysis of Baldwin's influence on Cone's analysis of black liberation theology. Kornegay, *Queering of Black Theology*, 92–96.
104. Quoted in Lei, "Louis Farrakhan, Calypso Charmer."
105. Baldwin, "Black Muslims vs. the Sit-ins."
106. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 82.
107. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 95. On ethnic particularism and nationalism, see Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 4.
108. Baldwin, "James Baldwin Discusses 'Nobody Knows My Name.'"
109. Smith, "Back-Water Blues"; Baldwin, *Another Country*, 49.

110. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 5.
111. Ward and Butler, *Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 261.
112. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1993), 94.
113. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 72, quoting Hansberry, “Integration into a Burning House?!”
114. Bagwell, *Malcolm X*; Malcolm X, “Twenty Million Black People”; Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots,” 10–12.
115. Belafonte, *My Song*, 329.
116. Chideya, “Memories of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”; Muhammad, “Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”; West, *Restoring Hope*, 24.
117. Butler, “Integrating into a Burning House.”
118. Baldwin, “How Can We Get the Black People to Cool It?,” 53.
119. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (1993), 105.
120. In *James Baldwin: A Biography*, Leeming describes Baldwin as a “relentless prophet-spokesman” (57), “artist as prophet” (322), “witness-prophet” (334), and “prophet to the whole nation” (387). In reference to *Fire Next Time*, Leeming writes, “The prophet had been heard by the *whole* nation” (215). In “The Negro and the American Promise,” Kenneth Clark described Baldwin “as resembling an Old Testament prophet.”
121. Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, 19.
122. Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, 20.
123. Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets*, 20.
124. Taschen Publishing Company’s 2017 art house edition of *The Fire Next Time* is dominated by images of Martin Luther King Jr., although King is not mentioned once in the book—opening with two frontispieces featuring King and ending with an image of a protester with the sign “Honor King: End Racism.”
125. Howard, “There’s a Bill Due.”
126. Baldwin, *Fire Next Time* (2017), 260, 261; Feaste and Spencer, “History of Ar-Razzaq Islamic Center.”
127. Baraka, “James Baldwin.”

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