Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's "Blues Text" as Intracultural Critique

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In "Baldwin, Bebop, and 'Sonny's Blues,' " Pancho Savery argues that, "although there have been interesting analyses of 'Sonny's Blues,' none of them has gotten to the specificities of the music and the wider cultural implications." As Savery points out, most of these analyses tend to focus on music as "the bridge the narrator crosses to get closer to Sonny" or to look at the blues through a somewhat superficial lens.[1] Like Savery, I believe that the "kind and form of these particular blues make all the difference" (166). The story, though titled "Sonny's Blues," strongly supports a reading that it is jazz, and more specifically "Bebop," that Sonny plays in the culminating scene, a cultural context few critics seem to foreground in their treatment of the story.[2]

Perhaps it's possible then to see Baldwin's title as an invitation to question the very nature of the blues Sonny plays. Taking up Houston Baker's notion of the "blues matrix," in addition to the astute research of both Savery and Richard N. Albert, can help to illuminate Baldwin's treatment of the "metaphorical nature of the blues matrix" (Baker 10) and its relationship to jazz, as well as the cultural assumptions under which this treatment operates. And this, in turn, allows for a more "trained," as Baker might put it (8), interpretation of a text that is multivalent not only in its play of language and imagery, but also in its relationship to what the transition from the blues to jazz means in Harlem and in the larger context of urban African American culture. Baldwin's story ultimately signifies on, or repeats with a difference,[3] the function of the blues as relating the history of Black culture in America in order to argue for a critical awareness among African Americans of the historical contexts of their own cultural forms.

"Sonny's Blues" deals not only thematically with the crossroads between the blues and jazz, but addresses the need for a new form of cultural narrative as a repository for the experiences of African Americans. When the narrator comes to understand his brother Sonny through the latter's apparent struggle to strike out into the deep, unexplored waters of jazz improvisation, the metanarrative quality of jazz is foregrounded; the "blues" Sonny plays are a commentary on the historical context and function of the blues Baldwin suggests are inadequate to convey the "sad stories" of urban Harlem. The narrator is only really able to listen, however, after experiencing the loss of his daughter and after observing Sonny enjoy the singing voice of a woman at a street revival meeting—despite the "terrible song"—and hearing from his mother the narrative of "darkness" traditionally related through the blues but transformed by Sonny into Bebop, a form of jazz that both embraces and critiques that very narrative.

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"Sonny's Blues," then, while arguably a "blues text," comments on the social text that is the blues. In *Blues, Ideology, and African American Literature,* Houston A. Baker, Jr., posits that a "blues text may . . . announce itself by the onomatopoeia of the train's whistle sounded on the indrawn breath of a harmonica or a train's bell tinkled on the high keys of an upright piano," or "other railroad sounds." Baldwin's story, while it does not employ onomatopoeia, does begin with what Baker calls "*wheels-over-track-junctures*" (8). In the opening paragraph, the narrator reads Sonny's "story" in the newspaper while riding the subway from Harlem to the school where he teaches algebra: "I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (103). The image of the narrator's face reflected in the window of the subway car, along with the hint of the roaring sound of the "darkness," or the subway itself—for Baldwin's words comprise a curious moment of synaesthesia—certainly points to the "transience" of the railway juncture Baker views as unique to the matrix of the blues (7), the "always already" of African American experience and culture (4). Baldwin's description of the motion inside the subway car conveys the rhythm of "change, movement, action, continuance" of the "always nomadically wandering" blues (Baker 8); however, the narrator of "Sonny's Blues" does not feel the uncertain hope, the possibility of "unrestrained mobility and unlimited freedom" that, according to Baker, the railway once symbolized to African Americans (11).

As opposed to the "city of refuge" (De Jongh 15) of the early decades of the twentieth century, the narrator's Harlem is that of "the emerging ghetto" (73). In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin describes the sense of dread he felt there as a boy of fourteen:

> . . . the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin: a cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parceled out here and there; an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail. It was a summer of dreadful speculations and discoveries, of which these were not the worst. Crime became real, for example—for the first time—not as a possibility but as *the* possibility. (34-35)

In "Sonny's Blues," the narrator and his brother each attempts to survive post-Korean War Harlem (Savery 167) in his own way: the former by the "respectability" of teaching algebra and ignoring the struggles within his own community, the latter by seeking musical membership in a society which will allow him some sort of agency not only in his own life, but also in the narrative of the lives that comprise the history of African Americans.

Along with the reference to the movement of the subway car at the beginning of "Sonny's Blues," we get the poignant image of the narrator's face "trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (103). Baldwin's use of *trapped* at the beginning of this text is no accident, for negotiating the trap of a specific cultural narrative is the subject of "Sonny's Blues," as well as the unique version of the blues Sonny eventually achieves.

Clearly, "Sonny's Blues" not only *tells* a story; it is *about* the telling of stories. The narrator's reading of Sonny's "story" is what inaugurates the text: "I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story" (103). Moreover, it is not accidental that this reading takes place in conjunction with the story's reference to railway tracks. While Sidney H.

Bremer sees such references as emblematic of "standard Chicago novels" (141), Baker's "blues matrix" allows for further theorizing of such a trope: "The materiality of any blues manifestation . . . is, one might say, enciphered in ways that enable the material to escape into a named, or coded, blues signification" (6). Thus Baldwin's immediate nod to this tradition, along with the narrator's questioning of the plausibility of the narrative in which Sonny is in danger of becoming trapped, can be seen as a sort of key, or legend, to the map of contesting narratives within the text, perhaps analogous to or an extension of the blues' "boundless network that redoubles and circles, makes sidings and ladders, forms Y's and branches over the vastness of hundreds of thousands of American miles" (Baker 7).

While "Sonny's Blues," by reference to this trope, as well as by its title, announces itself as a "blues text," it ultimately incorporates the "blues matrix" into a network of signification that comments directly on that matrix as obsolete. Baldwin takes the blues, the "always already" of African American culture (Baker 4), and signifies on them by foregrounding stylistically narratives reminiscent of the "resignation" Ben Sidran sees as thematic of traditional blues music (qtd. in Boggs and Pratt 282), an element most critics would, admittedly, wish to problematize.[4] Baldwin, however, is not critiquing the blues per se, but advocating the necessity of African Americans' self-awareness of the context of their own cultural forms, and particularly of the hybrid narratives that can result from their appropriation. Boggs and Pratt point out that, "to the extent that the social conditions that shaped the blues were agrarian, precapitalist, and racially defined, the music existed outside the dominant economic system and social relations" (279). However, as Baker emphasizes, "By the 1920's American financiers had become aware of commercial possibilities not only of railroads but also of black music deriving from them" (12). By the time Baldwin's story takes place, this appropriation was no doubt pervasive, as my comments on Creole's playing of "Am I Blue?" will later demonstrate. Jazz, I argue, represents a revision of the blues that allows for commentary on the disappointing economic and social conditions of African American urban culture—in "Sonny's Blues," specifically, the conditions of Harlem's ghetto.

The narrator wants to believe that Sonny's Harlem "story" of having been arrested for selling heroin isn't true: "It was not to be believed and I kept telling myself that . . . ." Yet he knows it's entirely plausible: ". . . at the same time I couldn't doubt it. I was scared, scared for Sonny" (103). The narrator's struggle, due to his inability to come to terms with the new set of problems his culture must face, also serves as a microcosm for the attempt of the text to transcend the easy reliance on the blues as a panacea for these conflicts.

Boggs and Pratt note that in the fifties and sixties "blues began to lose its special status among blacks and yielded its popularity to the more commercialized forms that evolved into big business: rhythm and blues, rock, Motown, and soul" (284-85). No doubt this loss of status, partly the result of "the process of cultural centralization and media standardization" (Boggs and Pratt 285) was of concern to Baldwin, who early in "Sonny's Blues" foreshadows the direction both Sonny's "story" and the text itself will take. After reminiscing that Sonny had "always been a good boy" (103), despite the threatening influences of life in Harlem, and speculating that perhaps many of his students were "popping off needles every time they went to the head" (104), the narrator hears amidst the mocking, denigrating shouts and laughter on the playground an unusually hopeful sound: "One boy was whistling a tune[;] at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool

and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds" (104). The narrator also notes that it is almost spring, that "the sap was rising in the boys" (105). However, Baldwin's description in *The Fire Next Time* of his fourteenth summer in Harlem keeps us from seeing this traditionally positive imagery as hopeful:

> It turned out, then, that summer, that the moral barriers that I had supposed to exist between me and the dangers of a criminal career were so tenuous as to be nearly nonexistent. I certainly could not discover any principled reason for not becoming a criminal, and it is not my poor, God-fearing parents who are to be indicted for the lack but this society. I was icily determined—more determined, really, than I then knew—never to make my peace with the ghetto but to die and go to hell before I would let any white man spit on me, before I would accept my "place" in this republic. I did not intend to allow the white people of this country to tell me who I was, and limit me that way, and polish me off that way. (37-38)

Baldwin continues by noting the necessity of a "gimmick" for "every Negro boy" to "lift him out, to start him on his way. *And it does not matter what the gimmick is*" (38).

"Sonny's Blues" exemplifies Baldwin's commitment to being a "trained" critic of the contesting intracultural narratives that have had profound impacts on the consciounesses and destinies of African Americans in twentieth-century urban life.

The tune the narrator hears that rises above the schoolyard chatter he interprets as ominous refers to the gimmick Sonny employs in his attempt to escape the narrative of the Harlem ghetto, for the passage is, as Richard N. Albert points out, a reference to Charlie Parker:

> The key words in this passage are "complicated," "bird," and "holding its own through all those other sounds," all of which evoke the image of Bird Parker blowing his cool and complicated improvisations over the accompaniment of the other members of a jazz combo. (180)

On his way home, the narrator encounters a boy "looking just like Sonny" whose own story we can surmise is precisely what Sonny's gimmick is supposed to help him escape. The narrator had "never liked him" because of his participation in the ghetto dynamic he himself had worked so hard to rise above: "And now, even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners, was always high and raggy" (105). Their conversation about Sonny is key to the commentary Baldwin creates to both contain and critique the "already extant" blues matrix (Baker 9).

When the boy, who remains nameless, asks the narrator what he is going to "do" about Sonny, the narrator replies, " 'Look. I haven't seen Sonny for over a year, I'm not sure I'm going to do anything. Any way, what the hell *can* I do?' " The boy's response to this is "resignation": " 'That's right,' he said quickly, 'ain't nothing you can do. Can't help old Sonny no more, I guess.' " The talk soon moves from Sonny's story to that of the boy, who asserts that, if he were smart, he would "have reached for a pistol a long time ago." The narrator's response to this is the avoidance that keeps us from knowing what this boy's story is:

> "Look. Don't tell me your sad story, if it was up to me, I'd give you one." Then I felt guilty—guilty, probably, for never having supposed that the poor bastard *had* a story of his own, much less a sad one, and I asked, quickly, "What's going to happen to him now?" (106)

At first the boy doesn't answer directly; rather, he speculates on his own role in Sonny's demise, while the narrator

observes a bar in which "the jukebox was blasting away with something black and bouncy," a description which, because it is linked with the description of a barmaid doomed to whoredom, is denigrating. When the narrator learns that the boy had told Sonny heroin "felt great," he links the music, presumably jazz and possibly Bebop, "the doomed, still struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore," and the question of Sonny's fate to the overarching narrative of Harlem as a dead-end:

> All this was carrying me some place I didn't want to go. I certainly didn't want to know how it felt. It filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with menace; and this menace was their reality. (107)

When the narrator repeats his question concerning Sonny's fate, the boy recites a scenario, or narrative, with which he seems to have some familiarity, one of Sonny being sent to "some place" where they will "cure" him, after which " 'Maybe he'll even think he's kicked the habit. Then they'll let him loose'—he gestured, throwing his cigarette into the gutter. 'That's all' " (107).

What follows is a back-and-forth exchange, with jazz music in the background, that illustrates the contesting narratives battling for Sonny's fate:

> "What do you mean, that's *all*?"
>
> But I knew what he meant.
>
> "I *mean*, that's *all*." He turned his head and looked at me, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "Don't you know what I mean?" he asked, softly.
>
> "How the hell *would* I know what you mean?" I almost whispered it, I don't know why.
>
> "That's right," he said to the air, "how would *he* know what I mean?" He turned toward me again, patient and calm, and yet I somehow felt him shaking, shaking as though he were going to fall apart. I felt that ice in my guts again, the dread I'd felt all afternoon; and again I watched the barmaid, moving about the bar, washing glasses, and singing. "Listen. They'll let him out and then it'll just start all over again. That's what I mean."
>
> "You mean—they'll let him out. And then he'll just start working his way back in again. You mean he'll never kick the habit. Is that what you mean?"
>
> "That's right," he said, cheerfully. "*You* see what I mean." (107-08)

This particular passage illustrates that what is at stake is Sonny's adherence to or transcendence of the Harlem-as-dead-end plot the boy is intrinsically aware of but which the narrator has difficulty formulating because of his own apparent escape from it. The play on language, both through repetition and through Baldwin's use of italics to emphasize the boy's internalization of such a narrative as well as its foreignness to the narrator, comes close to the structural qualities of jazz Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes as "repeating a form and then inverting it through a process of variation," or "signifying" (291). In effect, this conversation sets up the fatalistic narrative of the ghetto Baldwin was so aware of, represented by "That's all," the narrator and the boy repeating variations on both it and "That's what I mean," or "You know what I mean" to create the effect of jazz's improvisation on standard melody lines.

In his study of the relationship between music and rhetoric, Darryl Hattenhauer points out that "to improvise is to reclassify, to transvalue, to redefine" (5). Here, the standard melody, theme, or narrative of the "resignation" of the "urban blues" is covertly acknowledged as the obstacle Sonny, jazz, and the text which contains them must overcome. Significantly, the narrator and the boy part ways at the subway station, symbolic, as we have seen, of the "tracks," where the boy asks the narrator for money, as he has done many times before. But because the narrator has taken part in improvising on a narrative he has up until now only experienced externally, his former hatred for the boy dissipates: "All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me. I didn't hate him anymore. I felt that in another moment I'd start crying like a child" (108). However, he doesn't make the

effort to communicate with Sonny until Sonny, from prison, writes him a letter which explicitly denies the relationship between his problems and being a musician and also makes the request to see his brother, which, when it happens, triggers forgotten, perhaps repressed, emotions and memories in the narrator: "When I saw him many things I thought I had forgotten came flooding back to me" (110). One of these "things" is the Harlem of their childhood, through which their cab ride takes them, at Sonny's request.

The narrator's description of Harlem, in fact, has the same ominous, fatalistic tone as Baldwin's in *The Fire Next Time*:

> . . . houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster. Some escaped the trap, most didn't. (112)

In fact, the narrator feels as though, by bringing Sonny to his home, a home similar to the ones in which they were raised, he is "bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape." Because of this, he, unlike his wife Isabel, feels extremely uncomfortable with the situation:

> . . . Isabel, who is really much nicer than I am, more open and giving, had gone to a lot of trouble about dinner and was genuinely glad to see him. And she's always been able to tease Sonny in a way that I haven't. It was nice to see her face so vivid again and to hear her laugh and watch her make Sonny laugh. She wasn't, or, anyway, she didn't seem to be . . . embarrassed. She chatted as though there were no subject which had to be avoided and she got Sonny past his first, faint stiffness. And thank God she was there, for I was filled with that icy dread again. (113)

Isabel's lack of discomfort is not surprising considering the narrator's observation that some boys "escape," but most don't. Isabel's function here as a woman is as a sort of glue for the familial rifts between men that occur in the ghetto of Harlem. Like the boy, Isabel seems to feel some degree of familiarity with the general situation. The narrator, however, having ignored with distaste the "sad stories" of others, feels extreme discomfort: "Everything I did seemed awkward to me, and everything I said sounded freighted with hidden meaning" (113). Ironic here is the narrator's use of the word *freighted*, which has immediate connotations of the railway, to refer to his dialogue with Sonny. His discomfort stems from the expectation that Sonny is still addicted to heroin, that he is fulfilling the narrative of Harlem's menace. The narrator is beginning to shoulder the "freight" of his community's stories and history, which he has until now avoided, and is discovering it to be heavy.

This "hidden meaning," or the darkness in which he sees himself trapped at the beginning of the story, is comprised of the many things the narrator has forgotten but which Sonny makes him remember, one of which is his mother and the "old folks" sitting around their living room and talking on Sunday after dinner. Interestingly, the narrator always imagines her wearing "pale blue" (114), which, in conjunction with his description of how he felt as a child on those darkening afternoons, signifies the blues' historical function of keeping his culture's stories alive. His change from the past to the present tense suggests not only the consistency with which these afternoon gatherings occurred during his childhood, but also the necessity of the continuation of such storytelling:

> There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room.

> For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside. And my mother rocks a little from the waist, and my father's eyes are closed. Everyone is looking at something a child can't see. For a minute they've forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the kid's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk. (114-15)

The narrator's repeated references to "a kid" arguably point to himself, especially considering the similarity of this description to that of his experience on the subway reading Sonny's story. The "darkness" encroaching on the windowpanes echoes the image of the narrator's face being reflected by the window of the subway car as it roars through the "darkness" outside, an image indicative of the self-examining in which the narrator engages as the story progresses.

As an adult, the narrator avoids this darkness, represented by the "sad story"of the boy he converses with in the schoolyard and the potential of Sonny's story to become equally as "sad." As a child, however, the darkness was important to his sense of well-being:

> . . . something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending. In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light. Then the old folks will remember the children and they won't talk any more that day. And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he's moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk anymore because if he knows too much about what's happened to *them*, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to *him*. (115)

Referring to her husband's brother's death, the narrator's mother says his father never talked about it because she would not let him. Her informing him about the tragic manner in which his father's brother, whom he didn't even know existed, was murdered, is significant because it ultimately allows the narrator to hear and understand Sonny's personal story and also the larger narrative of "darkness" traditionally related through the blues, which Baldwin suggests are inadequate to communicate the "sad stories" of urban Harlem. Significantly, the narrator's mother is near the window, watching for Sonny's safe return, a combination of circumstances which calls to mind not only the narrative Sonny is in danger of succumbing to, but also the contrast between the narrator's childhood and adult attitudes toward that narrative: "Then she stopped and the room was silent, exactly as it had sometimes been on those Sunday afternoons. Mama kept looking out into the streets" (116). Implicit here too is the earlier function of the subway car window as mirror, for the narrator is in the process of confronting what he had craved as a child but what as an adult terrifies him for the sake of his brother Sonny.

Later in the story, after his daughter Grace's funeral, we see that the narrator's self-examination is leading to an increased self-reflexivity about the darkness he's been trying so hard to avoid: "I was sitting in the living room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real" (127). Toward the end of the story, when Sonny and his brother are on the road to potential reconciliation, Baldwin again uses the imagery of the windowpane and darkness to suggest the necessity of the narrator's coming to terms with the urban master-narrative operative in his community, as exemplified by Sonny's heroin habit:

> . . . he stopped drumming with his fingers on the windowpane. The Sun had vanished, soon darkness would fall. I watched his face. "It can come again," he said, almost as though speaking to himself. . . . "I just want you to know that." (135)

The narrator's mother seems to have an awareness of her son's difficulty in dealing with the encroaching darkness of his confrontation with himself and with the tragedies he'd been trying to escape from, which during his cab ride with Sonny he refers to as "that part of ourselves which had been left behind" (112). " 'Oh, honey,' she said, 'there's a lot that you don't know. But you are going to find it out' " (118).

As in the case of Isabel, the narrator's mother has served, as Trudier Harris argues, "as the hold on society and sanity for her husband" (78):

> ". . . I praise my Redeemer," she said at last, "that He called your Daddy home before me. I ain't saying it to throw no flowers at myself, but, I declare, it keeps me from feeling too cast down to know I helped your father get safely through this world. Your father always acted like he was the roughest, strongest man on earth. And everybody took him to be like that. But if he hadn't had *me* there—to see his tears!" (118)

Harris emphasizes that, while Baldwin treats the narrator's mother "in a straightforward manner through actions that invoke intrinsic respect," her roles have been the "traditional ones of wife, companion, and comforter" (78-79). However, as Harris points out, "the mother is tied to the other women in the *tone* of the story she relates, which makes her a witness to suffering and places her in the company of those who hope for deliverance" (78). While this observation is discerning, Harris tends to relegate the women Sonny observes at the revival meeting to the function of helping Sonny understand his relationship to music better and helping the two brothers to become reconciled: "Vicariously, through his drug habit, Sonny knows the singer's possible tales of woe, the singing that the pain manifests. . . . The shock of recognition he sees passing between Sonny and the suffering woman is what must also pass between Sonny and himself" (81).

Harris's exclusion of Baldwin's emphasis of the bond *between* the women on the street is surprising considering her assertion that critics of Baldwin's work either give his female characters only "cursory attention" or relegate them, "in spite of their roles as central or shaping forces in the lives of the male characters," to a "secondary or nonexistent place in their discussions of the fiction" (4). Baldwin's description of the tambourine player and singer and an onlooking woman unmistakably points to an awareness of the nature of their entrapment in the very narrative about black women Harris, above, falls into: "Kids and older people paused in their errands and stood there, along with some older men and a couple of very tough looking women who watched everything that happened on the avenue, as though they owned it, or were maybe owned by it" (128). The entrapment of these women in narratives that are merely small variations on each other is something both Baldwin and the women in the story themselves recognize:

> The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. (129)

The inclusion of this reference to "Sisters" is significant in a story that concerns two brothers trying, with not a lot of initial success, to make some sort of connection with each other. Sonny acknowledges how much suffering the woman had to go through to "sing like that" (132), but the suffering called to mind is that of the woman

who has most likely been beaten by a Black man within the Harlem community, an implication in tune with Baldwin's aim for a more critical awareness of the historic contexts of African American cultural forms, an awareness the narrator eventually begins to develop.

The lack of such an awareness, however, is definitely an obstacle for him. When, after their mother's funeral, Sonny tells the narrator that he wants to be a musician, the narrator responds with a certain measure of bewilderment: "I'd never played the role of the older brother quite so seriously before, had scarcely ever, in fact, *asked* Sonny a damned thing. I sensed myself in the presence of something I didn't really know how to handle, didn't understand" (119). The narrator's uneasiness is even more apparent when he learns that it is jazz Sonny wants to play:

> I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor. It seemed—beneath him, somehow. I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called "good-time people." (120)

The word *jazz* sounds "heavy" and "real" to the narrator, who seems concerned not with the music itself but with the people it represents; his previous description of the barmaid is echoed in the phrase *good-time people*. Later in the story, when the narrator and Sonny frequently argue, the narrator comments: "I didn't like the way he carried himself, loose and dreamlike all the time, and I didn't like his friends, and his music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It sounded just that weird and disordered" (126).

Savery's thorough exploration of the social, political, and economic implications of the Bebop represented in the story provides a good context. He argues that, "in African American culture, Bebop is as significant as the Harlem Renaissance," being "to a large extent a revolt against swing and the way African American music had been taken over, and diluted, by whites." Not only does Savery point out that "Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman were dubbed respectively 'The King of Jazz' and 'The King of Swing' " (169), but he also finds significance in the juxtaposition, in "Sonny's Blues," of Louis Armstrong, whom the narrator offers as an example of a jazz musician in his efforts to communicate with Sonny, and Charlie Parker, whom Sonny prefers to " 'that old-time, down-home crap' " (120). Savery points out that, "to many of the Bebop era, Armstrong was considered part of the old guard who needed to be swept out with the new musical revolution, and Armstrong himself was not positively disposed towards Bop" (168). Richard N. Albert goes so far as to say that Sonny's statement carries "a strong Uncle Tom implication," since "Armstrong was viewed this way by many of the young black musicians in the 1940s and 1950s. Had Armstrong become 'the white man's nigger?' " (180). Albert also cites Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt's observation that "the pathetic attempts of Moslem identification, the open hostility, the use of narcotics—everything was blamed on bop. It was the subject of vicious attacks in the press, the worst since the days of 'Unspeakable Jazz Must Go,' and the musicians were openly ridiculed" (qtd. in Albert 181). Albert appropriately argues that this context is indispensable to how we perceive "the narrator's concern about Sonny and the life style that he seems to be adopting" (181).

I agree with Savery's point that Sonny's response to the mention of Louis Armstrong is one of the keys to the story (167), but I would add that Charlie Parker, who is evoked early in the story by the narrator's description of the whistling he hears from the schoolyard, represents the paradox of the new narrative Sonny is trying to create for himself. Albert points out

that "Sonny's life begins to parallel Parker's," which involved a heroin habit by the age of fifteen (180). What Savery and Albert both achieve is a level of cultural analysis that contextualizes Baldwin's references within the sociopolitical climate of the "absolute key moment" of Bop (Savery 169), a network of signs which, when superimposed on the Harlem narrative Sonny is trying to escape, constitutes an additional level of cultural implications that need to be further explored.

Considering such a context, it is not surprising that Isabel and her family, with whom the narrator arranges for Sonny to stay while he finishes school, don't understand the "sound" Sonny creates on their piano. They do realize, however, that "Sonny was at that piano playing for his life" (125). Sonny leaves after Isabel discovers that he has not been attending school but spending time in Greenwich Village with his musician friends, and she implies that they have merely been putting up with him. The narrator speculates on the effect the absence of his music must have had in the household: "The silence of the next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began" (126). This statement demonstrates a growing awareness on the part of the narrator of the cultural, even historical importance of Sonny's musical endeavor. Indeed, the narrator begins to notice things about Sonny that clue him in to the complex level of cultural commentary in which Sonny, through his jazz, is becoming increasingly invested. Whereas before he didn't like the way Sonny "carried himself," he now sees that he "has a slow, loping walk, something like the way Harlem hipsters walk, only he's imposed on this his own half-beat" (130). When the narrator, interrupted while searching for evidence in Sonny's room that he is fulfilling the Harlem narrative of drug addiction, agrees to go to Greenwich Village to hear Sonny play, he notices that people are "polite" to him because he is Sonny's brother, that he is in "Sonny's world. Or, rather: his kingdom. Here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood" (136).

Harry Reed's study of the role of black taverns and bars in the socialization of black musicians of the Bebop era provides some insight into the narrator's observations. Reed notes that

> there the young player . . . worked to improve his technique, expand his repertory, extend the range of his instrument, and to internalize a positive attitude toward improvisation . . . . If the novice's competence did not match his confidence the negative response usually spurred him to greater effort and sometimes final achievement. Among other things the bar provided a site where companionships could be made and maintained. As the musician moved through the stages of novice, imitator, and finally cult leader the bar functioned as an institution in which behavior was modified. In this setting a new language was learned, a new type of dress was adopted, and new social modes were accepted. In short the teenage musician and his lifestyle separated him from his contemporaries who pursued more normal pre-adult pastimes. (7)

The narrator must tune in to this new cultural environment, both within and yet separate from his own. He notices, just before the band is about to play, a studied caution and sense of responsibility among them:

> The light from the bandstand spilled just a little short of them and, watching them laughing and gesturing and moving about, I had the feeling that they, nevertheless, were being most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly: that if they moved into the light too suddenly, without thinking, they would perish in flame. (136)

Considering Baldwin's previous use of "darkness" to signify the stories from which the narrator's elders tried to protect him, the "light" here can arguably be seen as a sign indicating that fearful region "a kid" dreads and in which his elders stop "talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk" (115).

As C. W. E. Bigsby argues, "Baldwin's characters are highly self-conscious, reflecting not only on the nature of their social situation but on the nature of their consciousness itself" (116). What the musicians are so cautious about is stepping into a position where they are responsible for carving out through improvisation a new narrative space in which they can comment on their own experiences of not knowing completely "where they've come from, and what they've seen, and

ences to the blues as the "shoreline" from which Sonny must depart:

> He [Creole] was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know. He was waiting for Sonny to do the things on the keys which would let Creole know that Sonny was in the water. (138)

As Savory points out, one main aspect

While there is no one-to-one correspondence symbolically here, certainly there are resonances of Africa. Piano keys, made of ebony and ivory, which comes from Africa, connote the black and white of the color line. And hammers perhaps suggest the manual labor so much a part of the history of African Americans as slaves.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin comments on the relationship of African Americans to their history in this country:

> The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles like clay in a season of drought. How can the American Negro's past be used? The unprecedented price demanded—and at this embattled hour of the world's history—is the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars. (95-96)

According to Baldwin, then, there is a clear distinction between the deep water, or acceptance of and dialogue with one's past that Creole urges, and drowning in it, perhaps signified by Sonny's fear of venturing away from "shoreline" of the invented past of the appropriated and widely disseminated form of the blues to which Bebop was reacting.

Baldwin's positioning of Creole as Sonny's dialogue partner and guide into these waters is significant because, as James Collier points out, "the Creole musician was . . . generally scornful of the blacks from across the tracks who could not read music and who played those 'low-down' blues" (qtd. in Albert 182). Creole's encouragement of Sonny, as the narrator describes it, to break away from the "shoreline," is entirely appropriate because of his familiarity with "the standard repertory of arias, popular songs, and marches that would have been contained in any white musician's song bag" (Collier, qtd. in Albert 182). Certainly his knowledge not only of the blues but also of the popular, culturally appropriated versions of it would put Creole, whose name carries the connotation of a hybrid language, in a position to encourage Sonny's own commentary on and dialogue with various hybrid forms of the blues.

Interestingly, "Am I Blue," the song in which Sonny achieves his own version of the blues, was written by two white musicians, one of whom had a classical music background. In fact, Albert places Ethel Waters, in terms of "entertainment value and popularity," along with Louis Armstrong (183). Albert argues that Baldwin chose this song "rather than one of his favorites by Bessie Smith," who didn't achieve the popularity Waters did, to emphasize that "tradition is very important, but that change is also important (and probably inevitable) and that it builds on tradition, which is never fully erased but continues to be an integral part of the whole" (184). While this is a good point, considering, as Albert does, the racially mixed audience in Greenwich Village, I would further argue that having Creole lead Sonny into "Am I Blue" poses for him the challenge of commenting not only on "traditional" blues, but also their urbanized hybrid, which is undeniably inscribed on the cultural narratives he will need to negotiate throughout his life and his music.

The narrator describes the band's rendition of "Am I Blue," which Creole leads them into, as "almost sardonic" (139). Savery sees Baldwin's use of this word as a reference to Bebop's tendency to take an old "standard" and make it new (172), again citing Baraka to support his argument: "Bebop was a much more open rebellion in the sense that the musicians openly talked of the square, hopeless, corny rubbish put forth by the bourgeoisie. They made fun of it, refused to play it except in a mocking fashion" (qtd. in Savery 173). Creole's role in the band, in this song as in the previous one, as the "blues

oriented observer" or "*trained* critic" (Baker 7) is apparent:

> The dry, low black man said something awful on the drums, Creole [illegible] and the drums talked back [illegible] cially believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother, they knew too much about them, knew where they lived, and how. (128-29)

These songs, one of the forms out of

> line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. (140)

As opposed to the participants of the street revival meeting, Sonny, through his non-lamenting meta-narrative of jazz, claims for himself and communicates to others, most notably the narrator, the agency some of the more crystallized forms of the blues deny, an agency without which the Civil Rights Movement could not have happened. As Savery notes, *freedom* was a word loaded with significance in the late 1950s, a word which spoke "to the politics of the Civil Rights Movement . . . . Baldwin's concept of family is, therefore, a highly political one, and one that has cultural implications" (173). Written in 1957, the "blues text" of "Sonny's Blues" exemplifies Baldwin's commitment to being a "trained" critic of the contesting intracultural narratives that have had profound impacts on the consciousnesses and destinies of African Americans in twentieth-century urban life.

Notes

1. Marcus Klein goes so far as to say that "the dramatic impact of the story . . . is not in his understanding of anything in the music, but in his reconciliation with what his brother in the first place vaguely represents. What he says he understands in the music is unimportant. Any message of reconciliation would have worked as well" (33).

2. Pancho Savery, Richard N. Albert, and John M. Reilly are exceptions to this general trend.

3. "Signifying," according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., can be defined in African American literary history as "*tertiary* formal revision . . . . its authors seems to revise at least two antecedent texts" (290). Gates also argues that "repeating a form and then inverting it through a process of variation is central to jazz" (291).

4. It is important to note here that Boggs and Pratt argue against Sidran's view. For an additional discussion of the significance of the blues as social protest, see Hay.

5. For specific criticism of why this assertion as applied to the blues in general is problematic, see Hay.

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