

**Baldwin's Worldview on an Endangered Species: The Black Male**

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**ABSTRACT**

There is little debate that the works of James Baldwin are descriptive of the state of race and race relations of his era not only in the U.S. but also abroad. What is startling in this new millennium is the applicability and relevance of his vision which today resonates with prophetic certainty.

Baldwin's world view that the United States was hypocritical, claiming to be one thing and living another, which provided the emphasis for his role as a writer: to force the nation to a truth and reconciliation process. Gleaning from the explicit statements and the contextual implications in Baldwin, this paper examines how his Biblical inheritance empowered him to take on the prophetic tendencies of John, "a voice crying alone in the wilderness;" Stephen, a brazen critic; and Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, to direct the nation to its sin of racism.

From novels to plays to essays, he lambasts, sounds the alarm, and emphatically describes in gruesome details an almost apocalyptic future for Black males. Ironically what he predicted—Black males subjected to random police stops and arrests, uncertain economic rewards, and bias in every field of endeavor and profession—now describes today's reality.

Excerpts from Baldwin's writings and interviews are juxtaposed with the statistics of the conditions of Black males today. Whether in education, economics (jobs, business, and income), or the three areas considered here—health, criminal justice and politics—Black males lag behind and have disproportionately negative outcomes compared to others of different races. Baldwin foresaw and tried to sensitize both White and Blacks to their shared roles and fate, resisting the glossed truth to discard myths and face reality. Because of his prophesy and its roots, a revalidation of the works of Baldwin could lead to the very open racial dialogue he wanted to foster.

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**Introduction**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century during the Age of Barack Obama, the first Black President of African descent, the idea that Black males are an endangered species in peril of becoming extinct or non-existent seems incongruous. It flies in the face of what now seems an almost unending list of Black male accomplishments including the late Max Robinson becoming the first Black to anchor a network newscast (1978); Colin Powell serving as the first Black to head the Military Joint Chiefs (1984) and the first Black Secretary of State (2000); Reginald Lewis

leveraging the 1987 buy-out of TLC Beatrice; Doug Wilder, a Virginian, being elected the first African-American governor (1990); and Robert L. Johnson founder of BET, becoming the first African-American male billionaire (2001). In the field of health, both the first and second Black Surgeon Generals of the U.S. were males from Morehouse School of Medicine: Dr. Leon Sullivan and Dr. David Satcher.

The prolific works of James Baldwin, while paying tribute to such success, even his own, nonetheless seemed to minimize such accomplishments. As he stated in *An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis* (1970):

*I jumped the track but that's of no more importance here...That's rarely, if ever afforded the people more than a great emotional catharsis...The American Triumph—in which the American tragedy has always been implicit—was to make Black people despise themselves (paragraph 5).*

Baldwin seems a constant naysayer, akin to the Biblical Jeremiah, who in a similar hollowing fashion pointed to danger signs. If certain trends if continued or remained unchanged, they would prematurely claim even more Black lives, particularly those of the Black male.

Seeking freedom, Baldwin, as so many others of his contemporaries, chose to become an expatriate as did his mentor and former housemate Richard Wright, author of *A Native Son*. In interviews throughout the remainder of his life, Baldwin explained that his relationship with his native land had been “explosive.” But ironically, his self-imposed exile provided him with more than an escape: It provided a lens for a reflective view of the United States.

*Only white Americans can consider themselves to be expatriates...Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean, I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me. You can never escape that. I am the grandson of a slave, and I am a writer. I must deal with both (1987, para. 11).*

Baldwin left the U.S. in 1948 when Jim Crow and legalized segregation were the law of the land. Even after these laws were overturned in successive years through a civil rights movement or a struggle akin to the current Arab Spring, the lives of many he held dear were lost including “the big three”: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Disillusioned by the deaths of his friends and a shift in the rapidly changing U.S. attention span from civil rights to Vietnam, Baldwin returned to South France in the late 1970s. He made intermittent trips back to the U.S. to chronicle and champion issues such as the missing and murdered Atlanta children in the early 1980s. For the most part, he observed the U.S. from a distance, ultimately dying in France of cancer on November 30, 1987.

This paper examines the concept of the Black male as an endangered species juxtaposing the statistical evidence from incidence and impact on Black males in three areas: health, criminal justice and politics. Using critical race theory as a lens, a comparative analysis of existing conditions are reviewed against the backdrop of Baldwin's writings on the same subjects to determine what correlations or contradictions exist if any. From this analysis, the evidence suggests that James Baldwin's writing should have a hallowed place not only in literature but also in the interdisciplinary examination of race, culture, development, and political discourse for being both descriptive and predictive.

In his effort to tear off the blinders, unplug the ears, and open the mouths of both the oppressed and oppressors through precept and example, Baldwin forecasted the future offering remedies, if his hearers only had the courage then and now to read and attend to his messages. That is the enduring gift and power of Baldwin, which allow his work and spirit to reach beyond the temporal borders of time and speak with clarity and power to current events, challenges, and opportunities.

Who was James Baldwin? Where and how did he live and write? Answers to these questions lay a critical foundation to develop an understanding of his world view and its relationship to the issues of health, criminal justice, and politics.

Born in Harlem in 1924, his worldview began to take form when he left the confines of his home neighborhood at 18 and moved to the Bohemian environs of Greenwich Village. Within a few years, his perspective was further enlarged from Greenwich as he made his way to Europe. There he stayed in Switzerland with a friend who was purported to be one of his many male lovers. He wrote *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, which describes how the Christian church can both repress and engage its congregation, to enable the membership to confront racism in their lives. Leaving Switzerland, Baldwin accepted the invitation of an actor friend to come to Istanbul, Turkey, where he penned his bestselling novel, *Another Country*. That book described the life of Greenwich Village and the role of the outsider, which gave him the opportunity to explore the themes of homosexuality, interracial dating, and extramarital affairs.

Compelled by the struggle for Civil Rights, Baldwin returned from Europe in the 1960s and became a social activist participating in the marches, sit-ins, and protests. He used his celebrity status to forge alliances with all the ideologues of the day including Malcolm X and Stokley Carmichael as well as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. about whom he wrote,

*He has succeeded, in a way no Negro before him has managed to do, to Carry the battle into the individual heart and make its resolution the province of the individual will. He has made it on both sides of the racial fence, of self examination... (1998, p. 657).*

Baldwin disagreed with King, particularly on his firing of Bayard Rustin, who like Baldwin was gay and a fellow strategist for the 1964 March on Washington. Because of Black backlash against Rustin and Baldwin for their sexual orientation, Baldwin confined his public role in civil rights to giving interviews.

However, his literary success meant that Baldwin could attract and provide access and attention to the movement. Baldwin brought what was happening in the American South out of obscurity and into the mainstream; however, critics charged that his commitment to activism caused his work to suffer. Many critics consider his latter contributions to be less renowned than his earlier work.

**Health**

Baldwin, described as a heavy smoker whose work is interwoven with descriptions of poor nutritional and living habits, died of stomach cancer. He described his own health:

*I am...of that generation...of which George Jackson ventures that “there are no healthy brothers—none at all”...My own state of health is certainly precarious enough. (1971, para. 4).*

He died from a form of cancer that kills Black men at a rate of 16.3 times more than nonHispanic White men and is attributable to tobacco. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 1987, the year of Baldwin’s death, 30.7% of White men 20 years and older were smokers while 40.3% of African-American men were smokers (1993). Table 1 illustrates the greater incidence of certain cancers in Black males. (CDC, Office of Minority Health, 2010.)

**Table 1: Cancer Cases Among U.S. Males**

New Cancer Cases per 100,000 – Men (2001)			
Cancer	African American Men	Non-Hispanic White Men	African American/Non-Hispanic White Ratio
All Sites	611.1	540.4	1.1
Colon and Rectum	63.3	50.0	1.3
Lung	92.9	68.4	1.4
Pancreas	18.5	13.8	1.3
Prostate	227.7	147.6	1.5
Stomach	16.3	8.1	2.0

According to the Centers for Disease Control's Office (CDC) of Minority Health website, "African Americans have the highest mortality rate of any racial and ethnic group for all cancers combined and for most major cancers. Death rates for all major causes of death are higher for African Americans than for Whites...." Data from that office also revealed that in 2008, ( the last year for which detailed data was available) African American men were 1.4 times and 1.5 times respectively more likely to have new cases of lung and prostate cancer as compared to non-Hispanic White men. In addition, the CDC reported that African-American men were twice as likely to have new cases of stomach cancer as non-Hispanic White men.

If disparate health statistics were only applicable to cancer, that would paint a bleak enough picture of health and health care for Black males. Unfortunately, cancer is not alone. Instead, the statistics reveal that for every illness one can think of, Black males die at a younger age and in greater numbers than their non-white counterparts. The following CDC grim statistics on other illnesses where Black males are represented disproportionately to their numbers in the population portray the outcome of poor health care and understandings about the relationship of health to comfort and security:

- In 2008, African-American men were 2.7 times as likely to start treatment for end-stage renal disease related to diabetes as compared to non-Hispanic white men;
- African-American adults are 60 percent more likely to have a stroke than their White adult counterparts. Further, Black men are 60% more likely to die from a stroke.
- Despite representing only 14% of the US population in 2009, African Americans accounted for 44% of all new HIV infections in that year. In 2009, Black men accounted for 70% of the estimated new HIV infections among all Blacks (2008).

According to the Endangered Species Act of 1973 as amended, any species which is endanger of extinction, particularly due to threats to its natural habitat or environs is identified as an *endangered species* (p.2). Current health research, including recent offerings from Black think tanks and health associations, directly attribute the health disparities experienced by African Americans in general and Black males in particular to what would be termed the habitat or environmental factors including



socio-economic factors. Such factors are most often associated with poverty and include limited access to high-quality health care, education, housing, employment, and HIV prevention.

Consequently, in the case of HIV, for example, the risks of infection are directly and indirectly increased according to CDC. The poor health outcomes for Black males, therefore, would seem sufficient to define the Black male an endangered species.

While there is little written on Baldwin's illness and death, insight on his own health and his thoughts about the status of Black male health can be gleaned from his work. Describing his main character of *Notes of a Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, Baldwin wrote:

*His illness was beyond all hope of healing before anyone realized that he was ill...it was discovered that he had tuberculosis and, as it turned out, the disease of his mind allowed the disease of his body to destroy him* (1998, p. 223).

During Baldwin's coming of age in the 1950s, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases ran rampant in the Black community. Even today, according to CDC reports (2009), Black men and Black women have the highest incidence of tuberculosis, particularly extra pulmonary tuberculosis which is found in other parts of the body besides the lungs.

Combining the more debilitating effects of disease with the deeply rooted fears of seeking treatment clearly indicate that the jeopardy for Black males' decline and demise increases exponentially. It is a sad historical fact that Black male health fears are based in the reality of the 40 years, from 1932 to 1972, of the so-called "Tuskegee Experiment." Nearly 400 Black men in Alabama died of untreated syphilis during a study sanctioned by U.S. public health officials to assess racial differences in ailments. The collective living memory of the Tuskegee incident has perpetuated Black male fears that "the cure is worse than the disease" when it comes to healthcare. As a result, Black males today still experience what Baldwin termed a "precarious" state of health manifested in the fear of participating in medical trials and research, organ and tissue donation, and even regular preventive care for treatable ailments.

Accordingly, the debate over the Affordable Health Care Act, cynically termed by the media as *Obama Care*, has been viewed differently— or should it be said viewed with “separate but equal” connotations and denotations— across the racial divide. The early provisions of U.S. Health Care such as free immunizations, medications such as insulin, and screenings for sexually transmitted diseases, cancer via mammograms and pregnancy prevention impact positively those with the least care, in other words, Blacks.

However, it is mental health, not physical, where Baldwin's forecast of the Black male condition seems most prophetic. He said in many interview that the impetus for his writing was due in part to his best friend jumping off the George Washington Bridge in New York. "I felt then, and, to tell the truth, I feel now that he would not have died in such a way and certainly not so soon, if he had not been Black," Baldwin said in 1961.

It was in 1946 when his friend Eugene Worth committed suicide. This tragedy informed if not directed Baldwin's first novel *Another Country*. The novel tells the stories of artists, primarily from New York, dealing with complex and overlapping issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia in three books. The first story, *Easy Rider*, describes the last day of a Black jazz musician, Rufus Scott (Eugene Worth) in November in the late 1950s. After his death, his friends must face the issues that led him to the point of suicide and led his White friends and others understanding of their own identities. Suicide informs Baldwin's work because he understood that personally the calamities caused by undiagnosed mental health ailments brought on by stress and other factors, contribute to the designation of making Black males an endangered species. According to CDC, in 2004-2009, young Black males ages (20-24) had the highest rate of suicide in the population, 18.18 per 100,000.

*They encountered the big world when they went out into the Sunday streets. It stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people; and Rufus realized that he had not thought at all about this world and its power to hate and destroy (Another Country, 1962, p. 27).*

Today's headlines capture only instances of Black male suicide when it is among the rich and famous as in these recent examples:

- In August 2012, a rap musical manager committed suicide, a death comparable to Baldwin's character Rufus's, because rap today is analogous to jazz in 1950s in terms of popularity. The deceased was Christopher Lightly, 44, and reportedly (*New York Daily News*, August 30, 2012) after an argument with his wife, he walked into the backyard and shot himself in the head. Various associates have attributed Lightly's death to financial problems said the manager who had negotiated deals for stars such as Busta Rhymes, Sean "Diddy" Combs and Mariah Carey (*Rolling Stone website*, 2012)
- In February 2012, Soul Train's executive producer and host, Don Cornelius, died from what was also determined to be a self-inflicted bullet wound to the head. Cornelius shared with Lightly and Baldwin's character Rufus a suicide in conjunction with a painful personal relationship. In Cornelius' case, he was said to be suffering from the aftermath of a stroke and other serious health conditions (*BET website*, 2012)

Ironically, the phenomenon of Black suicide, life imitating art as depicted by Baldwin, is the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of Black male death according to 2012 reports from the CDC. And even more profound, the reasons for these suicides are now commonly attributed to societal and environmental stressors such as cited in a 2008 article in a Black-authored news website, The Root.com:

*Moreover, young Black males are more likely to live in more challenging family environments. Sixty-eight percent of all Black households are single-parent households — pointing to an absence of male role models for young boys....The combination of family stress, violence in their communities and the discrimination they face is taking a toll.*

This report echoes the words Baldwin wrote 35 years earlier (1968) in the *Fire Next Time*:

*You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being, you were expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.... You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention; and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp on reality (p. 293).*

In today's 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are labels for the psychological turmoil that Black males experience, for example bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia, or if a younger male, maybe ADHD—attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder. The tragedy is, however, that no matter if it is mental, emotional, or physical, the degree of disparate outcomes will affect Black males disproportionately to their representation in the population. In other words, health disparities are evidence of what makes Black males an endangered species.

### **Criminal Justice**

*yet I still had to deal with the streets and the authorities and the cold. I knew what it meant to be white and I knew what it meant to be a nigger, and I knew what was going to happen to me. My luck was running out. I was going to go to jail, I was going to kill somebody or be killed.*  
(Baldwin, 1987).

At the age of 25 in 1949, Baldwin made it to Paris. At the time, Paris was the place where Black men could be equal, especially after World War II. Baldwin was arrested and spent eight days in a French prison. His roommate brought a stolen sheet into their shared hotel room, a room similar to those now used for the homeless in cities like Manhattan or Chicago. Based on what they termed “quilt by association,” both the perpetrator and Baldwin were arrested, shuffled about from one prison to the next, tried, and convicted of theft. In *Essay From Paris*, he describes not only the jail in which he was wrongfully incarcerated—guilt by association, but also the mental and physical jails that life of the ghettos where Blacks were forced to live. Baldwin detailed the sounds, smells, attitudes and his own person turmoil. Not only does he paint a visual picture to show what being on lockdown is really like but also writes a visceral experience where reader feels the damp and cold and can smell the sour smells.

Even when Baldwin writes of a prison of one's own making as in *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, he channels the feelings of dehumanization, powerlessness, and overwhelming helplessness that are associated with a jail experience in general and incarceration for Black males in particular.

This is especially tragic according to such sources as the Black website The Root.com because of the circumstances:

*Young Black males live in some of the most-difficult circumstances in our society; the data show that Black men go to jail, drop out of school and are victims of crime at rates far higher than their white counterparts.*

According to research by The Sentencing Project, a non-profit organization founded in 1986 to reduce the rates of incarceration particularly for non-violent drug related offenses, “More than 60% of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their thirties, 1 in every 10 is in prison or jail on any given day.”

Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) has termed the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* about the data that explain that jails are being constructed based on the number of Black males in fourth grade. CDF also describes this phenomenon, on its website, as “America's pipeline to prison — a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment and often premature death.” Furthermore, CDF's, Cradle to Prison Pipeline Campaign, “Nationally, 1 in 3 Black and 1 in 6 Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of imprisonment during their lifetime. Worse, research by Ohio State University law professor and author Michelle Alexander has shown that more African-American men are now in prison, on probation, or on parole in the US than there were enslaved in 1850 (Alexander, 2012).

The injustice in America, where Black males are caught up in a system that feeds off them, was a perennial topic for Baldwin. Through his characters including Giovanni, Sonny, and Fonny, Baldwin provided glimpses into how Black males are engulfed in the criminal justice system. He dwells on how too often they are presumed “guilty, until proven innocent.” This is a widely-held suspicion among Blacks of both genders, which too often is borne out by the arrest of Black males, rightfully or wrongfully, on a frequent and continual basis.

In his 1970 novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin tells the love story of a young couple who had known each other since childhood and have an out of wedlock, child. Fonny, the Black male, is

arrested and thrown in jail for allegedly raping a Puerto Rican neighbor. The story is told through the eyes of the girlfriend, Tish, who must fend for herself and her son, in a world hostile to both by virtue of their condition. Fonny seems to have been setup as a fall guy, by unethical and abusive cops, who are today dominating headlines with just such accusations. The unjustness of the arrest bring to mind the infamy surrounding the former heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, who was first arrested in 1912 for violation of the Mann Act. This law made it illegal to transport women across state lines for immoral purposes. (*Mann Act* (18 U.S.C.A. § 2421 et seq.), also known as the White Slave Traffic Act. Johnson was released from jail, before Baldwin was born, but was still a prominent figure, until his death in 1946.

The infamous Trial of the Century of O.J. Simpson in 1995 had similar thematic relevancy. Simpson was arrested and tried for the murder of his White ex-wife and her White male friend Ron Goldman. When he was acquitted, there were no riots as had been the case the same year when five police officers were acquitted, despite a videotape showing their savage beating of the unarmed motorist, Rodney King.

In *If Beale Street Could Talk* and another Baldwin novel, *Another Country*, resonate today because the criminal justice system still tends to make racial decisions. Of course, when it is interracial the situation is worse.

Consider, the case of 17-year-old, Genarlow Wilson of Douglas, Georgia, a high school athlete on a trajectory leading to college and possible pro football, comes to mind. In 2004, Wilson was given ten years for having consensual oral sex with a 15-year-old White school mate. Wilson served two years as a convicted child molester before the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that his sentence to be cruel and unusual punishment. This appeal judgment came only after years of protest involving national figures

such as Al Sharpton and sustained community and political action to draw national attention to the case. This type of social activism was part of Baldwin’s DNA, and he illustrated his belief that it should be used for the wrongfully incarcerated. In the “An Open Letter to my Sister, Angela Davis,” written after seeing Angela Davis in chains and manacles like a slave on the cover of Newsweek, Baldwin wrote:

*Since we live in an age in which silence is not only criminal but suicidal, I have been making as much noise as I can, here in Europe, on radio and television—in fact, have just returned from a land, Germany, which was made notorious by a silent majority not so very long ago (para. 3 ).*

During interviews in the 1980s, Baldwin reflected that he “fled America to avoid a future where I would kill or be killed at an early age.” His words could describe the usual local news where the suspect is described as “a Black male, between the ages of 18-30.” What Baldwin was complaining about was given the name *racial profiling* which achieved national issue status in the 1990s. In fact, conditions for Black males were reaching such a state of degradation that Minister Louis Farrakhan, successor to Elijah Muhammad and leader of the Nation of Islam, held a Million Man March on October 16, 1995.

Racial profiling, however, continued unabated. In general, racial profiling is seen when enforcement, generally by the police, particularly on major drug delivery routes, stop drivers simply for being Black. These wrongful stops and incarceration have produced sensational headlines.

**Table 2: 20<sup>th</sup> Century National Headline Racial Profile Cases**

<b>1991</b>	Rodney King beat by Los Angeles police in 1991 was caught on camera and sparked riots after the acquittal of the four officers
<b>1995</b>	Earl “Butch” Graves Jr., CEO of the company that publishes Black Enterprise Magazine, dressed in a suit and tie is stopped by police on his commute to work.
<b>1998</b>	Three young minority men are shot by state troopers on a New Jersey turnpike.

ABC News aired a report in 1996, “Driving While Black,” (DWB) showing what happened to three young Black men driving in a Mercedes-Benz around New Brunswick, New Jersey. They were pulled over three times for alleged minor traffic violations and had the car searched and the men themselves were searched. Incidents such as these had become so numerous that President George W. Bush weighed in on during an address before Congress in 2001, saying: "It is wrong, and we will end it in America," (ABC News).

Since these 20<sup>th</sup> century incidents, progress has been made in terms of lawsuits being filed, studies being commissioned, and data being analyzed; but the 21<sup>st</sup> century has begun with more of the same.

**Table 3: 21<sup>st</sup> Century National Headline Racial Profile Cases**

2009	Harvard Law School Professor Henry Louis Gates, 58, is arrested for attempting to pry open the door on his own home in the affluent Cambridge area of Massachusetts. President Obama weighs in on the controversy saying the officers acted stupidly, and he facilitated a “beer summit” between Gates, the white arresting officer, and Vice President Biden. Not surprisingly, public opinion about the arrest was split along racial lines with Blacks considering Gates a victim and Whites considering him a perpetrator.
2012	Movie Mogul and actor Tyler Perry is stopped less than two blocks from his multi-million dollar studio complex on the South side of Atlanta for allegedly making an illegal turn.
2012	T. J. Holmes, journalist formerly of CNN and now host of a news talk show on BET, is stopped only a few blocks from CNN Center

Commenting on Gates arrest for NBC News, Earl “Butch” Graves had this to say:

*My case took place back in 1995, and here we are 14 years later dealing with the same madness," he said Tuesday. "Barack Obama being the president has meant absolutely nothing to white law enforcement officers. Zero. So I have zero confidence that (Gates' case) will lead to any change whatsoever."*



Black males being stopped for “driving while Black” or walking while Black happens, according to young Black males on predominantly White campuses where they are outnumbered and highly visible. On campus the joke is that justice is often made into two words in the Black community—*just us*, or as Baldwin writes *Words of A Native Son*:

*The story that I hope to live long enough to tell, to get it out somehow whole and entire, has to do with the terrible, terrible damage; we are doing to all our children. Because what is happening on the streets of Harlem, to Black boys and girls, is also happening on all American Streets to everybody. It's a terrible delusion to think that any part of this republic can be safe as long as 20,000,000 members of it are as menaced as they are (p. 712).*

The CDF has found that “although the majority of fourth graders cannot read at grade level, states spend about three times as much money per prisoner as per public school pupil.” Spending on jails and prisons began its upward spiral with the so-called “War on Drugs,” which according to the Sentencing Project, has resulted with half of the prison population at the federal level being incarcerated due to drug offenses. In addition, the number of drug offenders in state prisons has increased thirteen-fold since 1980. In most instances, the incarcerated are not high-level actors in the drug trade, and had no prior criminal records for violence.

Consider these additional shocking facts:

- One in three Black men between the ages of 20 and 29 years old is under correctional supervision or control (CDF, 2012).
- In 1986, before mandatory minimums for crack offenses became effective, the average federal drug offense sentence for Black was 11% higher than for Whites. Four years later, after harsher drug sentencing laws, the average federal drug offense sentence was 49% higher for Blacks (Meierhoefer, 1992).
- Harsh new sentencing guidelines such as “two-strikes, you’re out” (Georgia) have resulted in a disproportionate number of young Black and Hispanic men being imprisoned for life when they are guilty of little more than a history of untreated addiction and several prior drug-related offenses (Haney, 1998).

These incidents would be egregious enough, but in and of themselves, they pale in comparison to the incidents of brutality Black males are subjected to in police custody. The names have become synonymous with the public outcry and reactions they engendered:

- **Abner Louima** --a 30-year-old Haitian immigrant was arrested and brutalized by a white police officer in 1997 inside the restroom of the 70th Precinct station house in Brooklyn. The attack became a national symbol of police brutality and fed perceptions that White police officers in New York were harassing or abusing young Black men as part of a citywide crackdown on crime. This case led to massive protests and heightened frictions between minority leaders and Mayor Rudolph W. Guiliani.
- **Ahmed Diallo**—a 22-year-old West African Immigrant was killed in New York in 1999 by four New York police officers. Forty-one shots were fired at the unarmed Diallo who seemed to fit a description on an outstanding warrant. Massive protests ensued against the Guilani administration and created Black resentment that was not abated by the Mayor's successful response to the September 2011 terrorist attacks, which destroyed the World Trade Center and claimed thousands of lives.
- **Trayvon Martin** – a 17-year old who was shot and killed by self-appointed neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman in February 2012. The shooting occurred in Florida, after Zimmerman phoned. Although Zimmerman admitting to following, confronting, and killing Trayvon, it took weeks for him to arrested or charged with any crime. The accused is claiming innocence under a law in many states, particularly the south, called *Stand your Ground*. The law gives a person the right to defend themselves against threat but seems only applicable to Whites since a Black Jacksonville woman who merely fired shots in the air was given ten years in jail for defending her home and children when her ex-husband violated a restraining order and entered the home.
- **Chavis Carter** –a 21-year-old in Jonesboro, Arkansas, after being arrested at a traffic stop in August 2012, allegedly shot and killed himself. Authorities maintain that although Carter was handcuffed in the back of the police car and had been searched twice, he was able to somehow produce a gun and shoot himself twice in the right temple. There are Face book pages on the incident, an on-line petition used successfully in the Martin case, and organizations including the NAACP calling for full investigations.

Once again history is seemingly repeating itself given the incidents that have happened to Trayvon Martin and Chavis Carter which stir painful memories in the Black collective consciousness of Emmett Till. In 1955, the 14-year old from the south side of Chicago was sent south for the summer. He was

murdered, on August 28, 1955, by Roy Bryant and his half brother, John W. Milam, in Money, Mississippi, for "wolf whistling" at Carolyn Bryant, wife of Roy Bryant (broadcast [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peoplevents/p\\_till.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peoplevents/p_till.html)). Till's murders were acquitted. Pictures of Till's battered, beaten and swollen face on the cover of *Jet* magazine not only shocked the 50,000 people who reportedly showed up at a Chicago funeral home to see the body in person but also the entire nation as well. Till had one eye gouged out, his head caved in, and his face literally smashed and mutilated beyond recognition. This led to organizing, marching and voting, and the ultimate election in 1960 of John F. Kennedy.

Baldwin used a play to force Blacks and whites to deal with their relationships to each other as well as make visible the fears, attitudes, and reactions in the aftermath of an unjust death by writing about a kangaroo court trial. In his 1964 play, *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, the lead character, Richard Henry, the pastor's son, is shot by a poor White man. Baldwin uses the Southern vernacular to describe the killer as a young redneck and to refer to White men in general and particularly those in public positions as "Mr. Charlie."

Racial incidents plaguing the criminal justice system are heinous enough, but what echoes from Baldwin's rhetoric are statistics of today's Black-on-Black crime. Reportedly, 93% of these murders are by other Blacks according to data being recorded and reported by conservative on-line magazines such as *The Blaze*, which includes U.S. Justice Statistics that show that as many as 9,000 African Americans are murdered annually. In Chicago, from March 16-19, 2012, forty-one people, mainly African Americans, were shot and killed in Chicago according to media reports from CNN to the *Atlanta Constitution*. Ten of the deaths occurred in President Obama's former neighborhood. In addition, according to *Blaze*, FBI records support the fact that in 2005, African Americans accounted for 49% of all homicide victims in the U.S. "almost exclusively at the hands of other African Americans."

Baldwin's commentary on *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, as it premiered on Broadway, seems apropos for this situation:

*"What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe"* (p.25)

Baldwin bemoaned the generational curse and conditions that he felt were escalating the violence and crimes, a type of civil war within the Black community that they waged upon each other. In writing of the attraction to Islam and Elijah Muhammad, Baldwin described Blacks as "a people from whom everything has been taken away, including, most crucially, their sense of their own worth." He then gave insight into what he thinks are the root cause of crime in his 1968 essay, *Letter from a Region in My Mind*, written after writing an article on Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam:

*People cannot live without this sense; they will do anything whatever to regain it. This is why the most dangerous creation of any society is that man who has nothing to lose. You do not need ten such men—one will do" (1998, p.330 ).*

According to the Children's Defense Fund's website, "Incarceration has bred a sense of defeatism, bitterness, resentment, and victimhood in much of the Black community—needlessly consigning millions of otherwise talented people brimming with potential, to unproductive, miserable lives." Blacks entangled in the criminal justice system, even if only arrested in a traffic stop arrest, find themselves it thwarted and diminished with reduced chances of getting a job or housing.

In his essay, *The Fire Next Time, My Dungeon Shook* (1998), Baldwin tells his incarcerated nephew that the current criminal justice system is debilitating both Black and whites:

*And this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and which neither I nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it...But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime (1998, p. 292).*

## Politics

Baldwin actively championed voting rights and worked with King on the Voting Rights Act. He recognized that Blacks needed to exercise their right to choose, particularly to deal with the criminal justice system. Today in many states, felons lose the right to vote according to the Sentencing Project. According to Alexander (2012), more African-American men were disenfranchised in 2004 than in 1870, the year the male franchise was secured. In 2008, Barrack Obama was elected the First Black President of the United States fulfilling a prediction by Bobby Kennedy which Baldwin had challenged.

In a 1961, the 36-year old Baldwin gave a speech in New York for the Liberation Committee for Africa:

*Bobby Kennedy recently made me the soul-stirring promise that one day – thirty years, if I'm lucky – I can be President too. It never entered this boy's mind, I suppose – it has not entered the country's mind yet – that perhaps I wouldn't want to be. And in any case, what really exercises my mind is not this hypothetical day on which some other Negro "first" will become the first Negro President. What I am really curious about is just what kind of country he'll be President of (2010, p.9)*

While many articles were written after the election proclaiming that America had entered a "post-racial period," Baldwin's challenge to Bobby Kennedy was like John the Baptist, "a voice crying alone in the wilderness." (John 1:23). He spoke from his heart what he believed and ironically has turned out to be poetically accurate.

In today's 2012 national election cycle, speaking in code where euphemisms such as *poor*, *unemployed*, *victims* or what Republican candidate Romney referred to as *the 47%* who were not going to vote for him anyway, Romney obliquely referred to the Black population. Such terms which seek to blame the poor for being poor are reflective of a Republican Platform which sought to continue tax cuts for the richest 1 percent while reducing the safety net to the last well-off in society. Baldwin, would decry such positions having once said that anyone who has struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor. The American political scene is so fierce that it will use almost any social weapon to gain an advantage.

In an essay, *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin sought to separate himself from the gay community in a manner that revealed not only his prejudices but also the prejudices and derogatory terminology commonplace in what until very recently had been a majority homophobic Black community.

*I felt that he [Clever] used my public reputation against me both naively and unjustly, and I also felt that I was confused in his mind with the unutterable debasement of the male—with all those faggots, punks, and sissies, the sight and sound of whom, in prison, must have made him vomit more than once (1998, p. 413)*

Baldwin was writing in response to criticism of him by Eldridge Cleaver, author of *Soul on Ice*, a firsthand account of what it was like to be a Black man in prison. While some attributed Cleaver's attack to his desire to distinguish his firsthand account from Baldwin's mere observations and brief sojourn in a French prison, others consider Cleaver's remarks and Baldwin's reaction to be indicative of the hostilities Blacks feel in both public and private about the issue of homosexuality. This split in the Black community leaves it open to political manipulation and loss.

Republican political consultant Carl Rove capitalized on homophobia in the Black community and Black church in particular, making "gay rights" into a battle cry and a wedge issue in the closely contested 2004 election. George W. Bush formed alliances with Black ministers including prominent

national figures such as T. D. Jakes and Eddie Long of Atlanta. Based on a shared opposition to gay marriage and partner rights, Bush was able to gain 11 percent of the Black vote. (Ironically, both Jakes and Long would have to confront the issue of homosexuality in more personal ways when Jake's son was arrested in a park for performing homosexual acts, and Long was publicly accused of molestation by several former members of a church youth group).

What is significant is that the election of 2004 was so close, that every single vote counted with the disputed results in Florida throwing the entire process into the legal system. In the 2004 election, Gore was the apparent winner of the popular vote, but Bush won the electoral vote and in a case, decided in the Supreme Court, the lone Black justice, Clarence Thomas voted with the majority to give Bush the election.

The importance of the Presidency to Black men is that of the ability to make appointments, which determine the policy on many of the other issues. For example, President Barack Obama used a recess appointment in April 2010 to make Jacqueline Berrien chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). In April, Berrien issued an update to the guidance Title VII, the American with Disabilities Act. The new rules are about the responsibility of employers to show that the use or proposed use of information from arrest or convictions records is job-related and consistent with business necessity (EEOC website). Given the number of Blacks in jail, limiting the abuse of past record in employment has significant impact on whether or not Black males can reenter society.

So when it came to politics, Baldwin was not silent on homosexuality, as he included it in several books and essays. But, he was more expressive and passionate about Civil Rights. He was attracted to the non-violence of King but also wanted the bolder and swifter actions, particularly to level the playing field economically, and so he was involved with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee—SNCC; the Congress for Racial Equality—CORE, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers.

Despite the fact that he had boldly exposed homosexuality in his groundbreaking 1956 novel, *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin seemingly did not want to change the focus or divide attention as Brooklyn Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm did by joining the Women's Movement. While today such a posture would be considered timidity, Baldwin felt the far more threatening issue for a Black male was his membership in the Black race. As he states in *Fire Next Time*, "You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a Nigger." (p. 4).

Most importantly, when it came to politics, Baldwin admonished Blacks to become involved and take a stand. In October 1963, Baldwin delivered a talk to teachers, a doctrine on political involvement, which should be a rallying cry as Blacks stood to play a decisive role in whether or not the First African American president would be re-elected. He wrote in the essay, *The Negro Child—His Self Image* (1963):

*The government is the creation of the people. It is responsible to the people. And the people are responsible for it. No American has the right to allow the government to say, when Negro children are being bombed and hosed and shot and beaten all over the Deep South, that there is nothing we can do about it....All this means that there are in this country tremendous reservoirs of bitterness which have never been able to find an outlet, but may find an outlet soon (para 19).*



## **Conclusion**

Baldwin's prophetic worldview on an endangered species sounds the alarm. This made him akin to Jeremiah, known as "the weeping prophet," because Baldwin's message was also a constant appeal to the consciences of both white and Black Americans. He urged them to avoid destruction of themselves and each other by learning to live together. It is for this reason Baldwin entered into the fray of the Civil Rights movement and the fight for justice for Angela Davis and for the investigation into the Atlanta child murders. He was committed to using whatever celebrity he had to transfer the spotlight from him personally to the issues he cared about.

From his religious upbringing and his own stint as a boy-preacher similar to Reverend Al Sharpton, Baldwin was familiar with what it meant to use a "fire and brimstone" style. He, like Vernon Johns, the predecessor of MLK, Jr. at Dexter Street Baptist Church, did not write to comfort but like the prophet Stephen who was stoned for his impertinence, Baldwin stirred things up.

And finally like Jeremiah, although he was often ridiculed in life for his sexual orientation and having peaked early as a writer, Baldwin was greatly honored after his death. That is because history has reviewed his predictions and assessments and found them to be accurate, relevant, and timeless, particularly as they relate to the jeopardy of Black males—still an endangered species. He was a soothsayer articulating the fears, needs, and aspirations of a marginalized people and defying the current conditions in the process. Consequently, the prophetic worldview of James Baldwin allowed him, and more importantly his work, to accomplish what he said he wanted, "to achieve a power which outlasts kingdoms."

## Epilogue

This chapter would be a useful supplemental reading for book clubs, discussion groups, and faith-based groups because Baldwin's prophetic overtones not only are made in the rhythm and language of religious sermons, but they also reverberate with similar themes.

In addition, the social issues lend themselves to being included in the growing community outreach discussions on health and wellness, crime, the on-going violence and gun control debates regarding incidences of crime, and discussions of today's politics. The work can be used as a primer to initiate discussions and a supplement to amplify other readings.

The primary goal of this chapter was to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of Baldwin's worldview of the U.S.'s hypocritical posture on issues of race and to determine the applicability and relevancy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in contrast to any suggestion that Baldwin's work has become dated and non-applicable.

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