

ESSAYS



“Chained Together in Time and Space”: W. E. B. Du Bois Looks at the Warsaw Ghetto; James Baldwin Regards the Harlem Ghetto

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IN JAMES BALDWIN'S THIRD NOVEL, *Another Country* (1962), Rufus Scott, an African American jazz musician from Harlem, remarks upon a peculiar bond he notices among his fellow New York City subway passengers:

At Fifty-ninth Street many came on board and many rushed across the platform to the waiting local. Many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other, he thought, but we ain't never going to make it. We been fucked for fair.²

Rufus's destination is the George Washington Bridge at the edge of Harlem and Washington Heights, from which he jumps to his death in an attempt both to break free from the racist house of bondage of segregated America of the 1950s and to escape the destruction he brought upon himself and his white Southerner lover, Leona. The chains binding American blacks and whites that he notices on his last subway ride give his story a pluralistic, social, and national dimension. While the name of the place of Rufus's demise hails one of America's Founding Fathers and its first president, his suicidal leap, like so many other anonymous exits all over the world, leaves no traces.

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1 It's an orphaned death. Yet, Rufus's memory haunts all the other characters
 2 throughout the novel, or as Baldwin put it to his biographer, David Leeming,
 3 he becomes *Another Country's* key symbol, martyr, and ghostly presence,
 4 "the black corpse floating in the national psyche."³

5 While the title of this chapter has been inspired by Rufus's musing about
 6 black-and-white chains of American racism, it also echoes W. E. B. Du Bois's
 7 idea of the color line slicing the globe at the dawn of the twentieth century.
 8 My focus is on the meaning of places that, as in Rufus's particular case, death
 9 is not allowed to mark because of the existence of the color line. More specifi-
 10 cally, I explore literal and literary "places of martyrdom" between the United
 11 States and Europe, or places and sites that we must recognize as stamped by
 12 histories of death and suffering, no matter whether the names of victims and
 13 particular details of their pain or demise are known, preserved, or memorial-
 14 ized. These places can be marked and built up as sites of commemoration
 15 and education, such as the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau in
 16 Oświęcim, Poland, or they can remain unmarked, such as lynching sites
 17 all over the United States, or the bridge that served Rufus's suicidal depart-
 18 ure in Baldwin's novel.⁴ Such sites can be seen as chained together across
 19 national boundaries despite separation in time, different cultural and socio-
 20 political circumstances, and divergent identities of those whose suffering they
 21 witnessed. As Du Bois and Baldwin demonstrate, seemingly disparate places
 22 of martyrdom can be seen as joining in a global narrative of sorts, in which
 23 troubled collusions of power, racial oppression, and death interweave into
 24 stories that may lose something in translation from one language and context
 25 to another but that still join in a multivoiced tale honoring those who could
 26 not tell it themselves.

27 The places of martyrdom and the stories they tell that I explore in this
 28 essay have drawn attention, in various ways, from diverse African Diaspora
 29 intellectuals, activists, and artists. My goal is to link Baldwin's and Du Bois's
 30 observations on places that African Americans occupy in the twentieth-century
 31 United States and beyond to what in *Darker than Blue* Paul Gilroy terms
 32 "a tradition of cosmopolitan reflection on racial hierarchy and injustice,"⁵
 33 the tradition to which Baldwin belongs along with such prominent writers
 34 and intellectuals as Ida B. Wells, Walter White, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frederick
 35 Douglass, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and numerous others who were his
 36 predecessors and contemporaries.⁶ As Gilroy emphasizes, specifically about
 37 Wells and the Grimké sisters, the nineteenth-century pioneers of this tradition
 38 engaged in "critical assessments of the complicity between shallow rights talk
 39 and routinely brutal regimes of unfreedom," and they brought about the "new
 40 humanism of which (Frantz) Fanon would speak years later . . . (a) critique
 41 of racialized political cultures and legal orders" that persisted well into the
 42 twentieth century.⁷

Keeping this tradition in mind and the historical moment of mid-twentieth century in focus, I examine instances of African Americans’ confrontations with multivalent meanings and material consequences, as well as specific locations of discourses on racialization and racism between Europe and the United States, and particularly the ways in which the literal and literary representations of black and Jewish ghettos have engaged W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin. I put in conversation, and slightly against chronological order, W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1949 essay, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” and James Baldwin’s 1948 essay, “The Harlem Ghetto.”⁸ In contextualizing this conversation, I juxtapose the very different backgrounds of the two writers, at the same time as I argue that they give us rather similar takes on ghettos as places of martyrdom in Poland and the United States. By showing how and why they trace the similar impact of racist violence and ideologies in locations as remote by the mid-twentieth century as the Warsaw Jewish Ghetto and the Harlem Ghetto, I underscore their contribution to understanding the ways in which social space, racism, and violence have historically come together within and without the United States. In so doing, I also illustrate the continued significance of their contributions in our own time, especially as we are called to revisit the idea of race as a function of social space, in the sad era when black teenagers continue to be murdered by racist vigilantes policing the color line.⁹

“MY OWN PARTICULAR AND SEPARATE PROBLEM”?

Unlike James Baldwin (1924–1987), who was born poor in Harlem, never went to college, and achieved prominence only later in his career, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Baldwin’s senior by more than five decades, was middle class and studied at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin in Germany, where he subsequently visited several times in the course of a rich and long career. Du Bois’s class-related mobility and opportunities to live abroad contributed to his intellectual development in ways that were out of Baldwin’s reach until he gained popularity and financial means in the wake of the success of his publications and activism in the mid- and late 1960s. Du Bois reflected on his experience and the geopolitical configurations of places he visited in the early twentieth century and during the Cold War in several volumes of his autobiography.¹⁰ Baldwin, whose concerns with race went well beyond Du Bois’s in their intersectional approaches to race, gender, and class, did not have a chance to contemplate a formal autobiography before his death in his early sixties; from his twenties on, he nevertheless wove autobiographical elements into all his writings in deliberate and conscious ways.

Different life stories notwithstanding, both writers visited places far away from their homeland—e.g., Du Bois Poland and Baldwin Turkey—located in the “East” of Europe and Asia, where they observed astonishingly omnipresent

1 racial systems of discrimination and violence. And yet, by the time the specific
 2 essays that I discuss here were published, Du Bois was a well-seasoned world
 3 traveler, while Baldwin was about to embark on his very first trip abroad.
 4 Their virtual meeting in these pages juxtaposes a mature cosmopolite with
 5 a local hero; the eminent intellectual and young aspiring writer; the elder
 6 whose life's work explored meanings of race and politics and his descendant
 7 who witnessed race's inextricable entanglement with sexuality, gender, and
 8 power. Du Bois's and Baldwin's accounts show how their views on race and
 9 place were embroiled with their respective visions of the United States, national
 10 identity, and how they saw ghettos in Europe and at home as both material and
 11 metaphorical spaces of racist persecution and martyrdom.

12 When W. E. B. Du Bois came to Warsaw, Poland, in 1949, he toured the
 13 area that was the last home—or rather the house of bondage and gravesite—of
 14 the Polish capital's Jewish population. Following the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
 15 and its defeat in 1943,¹¹ the “liquidation” of that part of the city by Nazi
 16 occupiers ensured that any survivors were executed or transported to death
 17 camps and the vast majority of the buildings destroyed. Du Bois's encounter in
 18 Poland inspired his address, entitled “Tribute to the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters,”
 19 that was delivered on April 15, 1952, at the Hotel Diplomat in New York.
 20 Reproduced in the same month in the magazine *Jewish Life* as “The Negro and
 21 the Warsaw Ghetto,” Du Bois's speech explains how his visit to the site of the
 22 Jewish struggle and martyrdom in Poland “brought back again the problem of
 23 race,” the problem that had until then seemed to be, as he emphasized, “*my own*
 24 particular and separate problem.”¹²

25 Before his address was delivered in 1952, Du Bois had visited Poland on
 26 three occasions, which he describes in his piece. Having befriended while at
 27 the University of Berlin, Stanislaus Ritter von Estreicher, a prominent Polish
 28 Jew from Cracow (Kraków), Du Bois was curious about the place where, as his
 29 friend promised him, he could learn something about “real race problems.”¹³
 30 Young Du Bois's first visit to Poland, and specifically Galicia and Cracow, took
 31 place in 1893, when he discovered strict segregation of Jews and Gentiles, and,
 32 as a black man, had to stay in the segregated “unter die Juden” or a “little Jewish
 33 hotel on a small, out of the way street.”¹⁴ When he came back on another
 34 visit, in 1936,¹⁵ he witnessed “Warsaw . . . in the darkness, both physically
 35 and spiritually. Hitler was supreme in Germany where I had been visiting for
 36 five months and I sensed the oncoming storm. I passed through Warsaw into
 37 the Soviet Union just three years before the horror fell upon that city.”¹⁶ Du
 38 Bois's description is uncharacteristically abrupt, so brief, in fact, that it can
 39 be read as furtive, as if he were eager to emphasize his sympathies with the
 40 oppressed, rather than ruminate upon the fact of his long stay in Nazi Germany
 41 that preceded his trip to Poland. At the same time, the very fact that he deliv-
 42 ered the address to his Jewish audience in New York in 1952, and that he

juxtaposed himself and his audience as racialized minorities brought together by the specific place of martyrdom of the Warsaw Ghetto, makes clear his desire to explain his double-edged position as a middle-class, educated black American who had some measure of mobility that the Polish Jews did not, and who was thus able to get out of the way of the impending horror.¹⁷

While the “darkness” he sees enveloping Poland and Germany is the darkness of anti-Semitism and the racist world war that it would soon cause—the “horror” can be read as an oblique reference to the Holocaust. It was not until his third visit to Poland that Du Bois was able to formulate an understanding of race that used the location he found himself in as a lens through which to rethink his ideas. That is, he went beyond thinking of his “own particular and separate problem” to an understanding that prompted his 1952 address to the audience of *Jewish Life*, which begins with the following preface:

I have seen something of human upheaval in this world: the scream and shots of a race riot in Atlanta; the marching of the Ku Klux Klan; the threat of courts and police; the neglect and destruction of human habitation; but nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw in 1949. I would have said before seeing it that it was impossible for a civilized nation with deep religious convictions and outstanding religious institutions; with literature and art; to treat fellow human beings as Warsaw had been treated. There had been complete, planned and utter destruction.¹⁸

Against the sea of rubble, the University of Berlin-educated author of *The Souls of Black Folk* studied the “complete, planned and utter destruction” that the confluence of racism, oppression, and violence visited upon the Jewish enclave in Poland’s capital. Not even his Harvard training and cosmopolitan sensibilities had prepared him for what he beheld, for “nothing in [his] wildest imagination was equal to what he saw.” All that remained, he reported, “was complete and total waste,” and amidst that waste, Nathan Rappaport’s sculpture of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters unveiled in 1948.¹⁹ Capturing this encounter between a prominent African American intellectual, a rare visitor in the Other Europe, with Rappaport’s monument, an ironic, pristine redundancy of the rubble and destruction surrounding it, Du Bois’s text ponders the effects of total war, worldwide racism, and monumental memorialization for Jews, Poles, and “all Americans,” as well as “the (whole) civilized world.” He also recalls the invisible dead whose martyrdom the monument commemorates; they are anonymous and erased from the place that saw their death or departure towards it: “No one mentioned the total of the dead, the sum of destruction, the story of crippled and insane, the widows and orphans.”²⁰

Taking aside its almost obsessive juxtaposition of Poland and Germany—a topic that merits its own critical treatment—“The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,”

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The Warsaw Ghetto Fighters Monument. Photos courtesy of Magdalena Zaborowska.

an essay that has been little noticed by both scholars of the Holocaust and African American studies,²¹ marks an important moment when Du Bois reevaluated his ideas on race and racism as the twentieth century rolled into its sixth decade when, as he put it bitterly, “Negroes’ . . . sons (were sent) to kill ‘Gooks.’”²² Of course, the occurrence of Du Bois’s “real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem” during his trip to Poland did *not* come about because the Holocaust was any worse than slavery and colonialism, but because, thousands of miles away from his homeland, wading through an abyss beyond the reaches of his imagination, Du Bois realized that the problem of race and religion could no longer remain and be articulated as his own “particular and separate problem.” Moreover, he emphasized, “[T]he ghetto of Warsaw helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph and broaden in the world.”²³

This emergence into a “broader conception” of racism as linked to worldwide tyrannies of capitalism and religious dogma is marked by self-acknowledged cosmopolitanism that both echoes and expands Du Bois’s original notion of the “color line.” It also links his changing ideas to a specific, albeit unexpected, location and structure that compound the Jewish place of martyrdom in the Polish capital. The new civilizing mission Du Bois suggests from the foot of the Memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters comes at the time when the Third World has just begun to shake off the yoke of colonialism and while the Cold War is evolving into its most frigid period. It marks the moment when geopolitics are locking the Second World of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and its “satellite” countries like Poland behind the Iron Curtain and under a specific form of occupation inside what was known euphemistically in the West as the “Soviet sphere of political influence.”²⁴ Du Bois’s vision of shared humanity across the lines of color meant to unite not only the proletarians but also intellectuals, artists, and activists worldwide in antiracist struggle, at the time when he himself was an object of state-sanctioned persecution in the United States.²⁵ Desire for liberation in this idealized call to rethink international oppression was to transcend separations dictated by epidermal hues, national borders, and continental and faith-based divides; as he wrote in the Credo to *Darkwater*, “[A]ll men, black and brown and white, are brothers . . . differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.”²⁶ As he subtitled the text version of his address, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” with, “By acquaintance with the problems of Jews and other targets of oppression, one gets ‘more complete understanding’ of the Negro question,” he also signaled the importance of the local points of reference and his individual positioning in American culture, society, and polity at the time.²⁷ Interestingly, a glimpse of such a local and national perspective is at the center of a piece by James Baldwin that, published a bit earlier, takes as its subject the same issue of places of martyrdom vis-à-vis

1 individual and national identities, though from a very different, lower-class and
 2 Harlem-based vantage point.²⁸

4 A MONSTROSITY OF A PROBLEM

6 In 1948, a year before Du Bois's essay proclaimed his broad vision of cross-racial
 7 solidarity to his Hotel Diplomat audience, James Arthur Baldwin wrote the
 8 essay "The Harlem Ghetto" that reflects on the oppressive atmosphere of
 9 his native New York City neighborhood, which, he wrote, "[had] changed
 10 very little in my parents' lifetime or mine."²⁹ A child of black migrants from
 11 Louisiana and Maryland who came seeking better jobs and economic stability
 12 in the industrial North, Baldwin grew up keenly aware of their displacement
 13 and their desperate efforts to keep the large family housed, clothed, and fed
 14 in the city that could offer only badly paid domestic work to some women
 15 of color and equally badly paid menial jobs to the men. Born at the Harlem
 16 Hospital, Baldwin grew up around the projects, and kept returning to the
 17 area no matter his subsequent fame and success. As for possible proletarian
 18 sympathies with socialism and communism that so attracted the more
 19 privileged Du Bois, he reflected in an autobiographical introduction to his
 20 last volume of essays, *The Price of the Ticket* (1985), that "my life on the Left is
 21 of absolutely no interest."³⁰ He flirted with this ideology as a young man, but
 22 more as a way to humor his friend, Eugene Worth, who was a member of the
 23 Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), than out of sincere conviction. After
 24 a few months of being a Trotskyite, Baldwin concluded, "it was impossible to
 25 indoctrinate me."³¹

26 Baldwin's return to the Harlem of his childhood is marked by a vision of
 27 his native ground as a place scarred by suffering and oppression. His writing
 28 about it enables a specific local optic, for he is someone who knows more than
 29 "the white man walking through Harlem [who] is not at all likely to find it
 30 sinister and no more wretched than any other slum."³² Harlem wears to a
 31 random observer "a casual face,"³³ yet Baldwin regards it as no Promised Land,
 32 no primordial world of childhood encased in the golden glow of nostalgia.
 33 To him, his neighborhood is a prison for his body and mind as a black American
 34 and a gay man, and this rhetoric anticipates the claustrophobic metaphors of
 35 his second novel on love, immigration, and homophobia between United States
 36 and Europe, *Giovanni's Room* (1956): "All of Harlem is pervaded by a sense of
 37 congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in
 38 the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the
 39 windows shut."³⁴

40 Baldwin's visceral depiction of Manhattan's uptown reflects his ambivalent
 41 affective location as a writer born and raised in Harlem, but made famous by
 42 straddling the divides between black and white Americas, between the United

States and Europe, and between hetero- and homosexuals.³⁵ “The Harlem Ghetto” emphasizes his preoccupation with the sensory perceptions of his environment and anticipates the complex focus of his novels and plays on the ways in which race and gender intersect with the politics of sexuality and social space. A black queer writer and civil rights activist at the time when women, gays, and lesbians were not seen as legitimate participants in the movement, Baldwin reconsiders his liminal location in his community of origin in the introduction to *The Price of the Ticket* (1985). As if making a new twist on Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness,” he perceives himself to be viewed by other blacks as doubly troubled, or as the “two-headed monstrosity of a problem.”³⁶ This late self-perception must be read in sharp relief against his earlier works, which clearly link the workings of racism with those of homophobia first in the local, then national, and finally international context.

Written when its author was just twenty-four years old and originally published in the February 1948 issue of *Commentary*, “The Harlem Ghetto” provides an invaluable introduction to the foci of Baldwin’s early works. More important for my purposes, this essay seems to anticipate, if not inspire, the transnational topic of race intersecting with other aspects of identity, and specifically the tortured relationship linking blacks, Jews, African Americans, and Europeans that preoccupied Du Bois following his trip to Poland in 1949. Unlike Du Bois’s, which takes domestic issues to Poland, Baldwin’s essay magnifies the local scene in a series of detailed representations of the African American’s other in Harlem—the Jew—and locates the discussion of the conflicted relationship between New York’s Jews and blacks within the sometimes overlapping, and sometimes discrete, realms of religious, popular, and news media discourses. In a brilliant move that anticipated what interdisciplinary scholarship in literary and cultural studies would theorize only decades later, Baldwin saw these discourses as key sites for articulating the conundrums of gendered, racialized, and sexualized identity in the context of the racist fallout of World War II at home and abroad. Moving between the local and the national, between his native ground of Harlem and the larger landscapes of the American imaginary, his essay problematizes the black response to the “Jewish question.”

“The Harlem Ghetto” proceeds from a gripping opening that locates the writer’s family in Harlem—“the buildings are old and in desperate need of repair, the streets are crowded and dirty, and there are too many human beings per square block”³⁷—through sections criticizing its “perpetually embattled” black leadership whose “dramatic and publicized battles are battles with the wind.”³⁸ Then comes a hard look at the “Negro press,” which “supports any man, provided he is sufficiently dark and well-known—with the exception of certain Negro novelists accused of drawing portraits unflattering to the race.” Next, “The Harlem Ghetto” offers a glimpse of the black churches in the area,

1 which Baldwin sees as dishing out religion that operates “as a complete and
2 exquisite fantasy revenge (in which) white people own the earth and commit
3 all manner of abomination and injustice on it; [and, in which] the bad will be
4 punished and the good rewarded.”³⁹

5 This indictment of black religious institutions for their role in maintaining
6 and perpetuating rather than fighting poverty and ignorance dovetails into a
7 frank examination of what Baldwin calls the “Negro’s ambivalent relation to the
8 Jew.”⁴⁰ That he brings up this divisive issue at all at the time when American
9 culture is struggling to combat anti-Semitism in the wake of the Holocaust is
10 a confirmation of his disorderly conduct as a self-described “[aspiring] Negro
11 novelist.” By pointing an accusatory finger at his fellow blacks, he is drawing a
12 portrait that is “unflattering to the race” and thus risking hostility of some of
13 his readers and critics.⁴¹ The “Jew” in Harlem, Baldwin explains, is a discursive
14 concept whose roots are both religious and secular and whose uses illustrate the
15 irreconcilable political purposes, multivalence, and omnipresence of American
16 racism. On the one hand, to blacks the term “Jew” is meant to “include all
17 infidels of white skin who have failed to accept the Savior,” while on the other,
18 it is a powerful symbol of black unity and resilience, as “the wandering, exiled
19 Jew . . . (is) a fairly obvious reminder of the trials of the Negro.” In the latter
20 approach, the Jew is someone to identify with, as “[t]he more devout Negro
21 considers that he *is* a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a
22 Moses to lead him out of Egypt.”

23 The concept of the “Jew” thus perceived serves Harlem preachers as a
24 handy rhetorical and emotive device linking “self” and “other” in a dramatic
25 wrestling match. It can shape the ways their flock see themselves and their
26 neighbors, if not the whole country, in exclusionary, and racialized, terms.
27 Like the casual facemask worn by Harlem for the sake of a white passerby,
28 the mask worn by the “Jew” imagined and discursively circulated throughout
29 Harlem’s black churches conceals and obscures a painful paradox. For while
30 a devout churchgoer knows that “[t]he image of the suffering Christ and
31 the suffering Jew are wedded with the image of the suffering slave, and they
32 are one: the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light,”⁴² the
33 same churchgoer will also “wear anti-Semitism as a defiant proof of (his/her)
34 citizenship”⁴³ outside of the church because s/he needs to hate the “infidels”
35 and “taskmasters” and because the darkness of “hatred must have a symbol.”⁴⁴
36 Caught in the “American crossfire,”⁴⁵ or the economics and politics of race
37 and class, the relationship between Jews and blacks in cross-ethnic Harlem
38 reflects and refracts the racialized relationships on the national scene: “the
39 Negro, facing a Jew hates . . . the color of his skin”⁴⁶ and enacts a fantasy
40 revenge inspired by what s/he has heard in church. At the same time, black
41 anti-Semitism is yet another symptom of the all-American way of positing an
42 identity of a majority by means of scapegoating a minority. Hence national

attitudes affect local practices: “Georgia has the Negro and Harlem has the Jew.”⁴⁷ Moving from the local to the national, Baldwin’s sweeping panorama of his neighborhood and its main players concludes with an indictment of “the American white Gentile . . . [whose] structure of the American commonwealth has trapped both these minorities into attitudes of perpetual hostility.”⁴⁸

Speaking against “the social and political optimists,” or those whom in his later works he will brand simply as “white liberals,” “The Harlem Ghetto” mocks a naïve belief that suffering makes anyone a better human being: “Oppression . . . does not imbue a people with wisdom or insight or sweet charity: it breeds in them instead a constant, blinding rage. . . . [T]here seems no hope for better Negro-Jewish relations without a change in the American pattern.”⁴⁹ Baldwin recognizes the Jew as the racialized other for the Negro in Harlem, and sees that pattern of racialization as reflecting American national racist politics, already in 1948. It is interesting to note that Du Bois’s realization that the “Jew” and the “Negro” (as he would put it) are part of the same global racist puzzle took place only in 1949, in Poland. Showing Harlem as a place of martyrdom for American blacks but also as a place where the “Jew” gets vilified by providing a handy “fantasy revenge” for the blacks as their racialized other, Baldwin seems to be taking Du Bois’s realization about the omnipresence of the color line and of the places of racial martyrdom further.⁵⁰

I’ve no evidence that Baldwin and Du Bois met or read each other; but it is very likely, if not quite certain, that they did read each other’s major works. Baldwin’s texts can be seen as both inspirations and direct responses to Du Bois’s call for new antiracist activism and anticapitalist struggle expressed in “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto.” As the author of *Souls of Black Folk* put it, “[T]he race problem . . . cuts across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to *all* men.”⁵¹

When Baldwin finally traveled to Europe, having spent some time in France, he found himself walking through a snow-covered hamlet in the Swiss Alps, where he was finishing his first novel, the Harlem- and the American South-immersed *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). He describes Loèche-les-Bains in his 1953 essay, “Stranger in the Village,” and this description can be read as a continuation of his musings on race, place, and discrimination begun in “The Harlem Ghetto.” Accompanied by his white Swiss lover, Lucien Happersberger, Baldwin encountered unanimous awe among the village’s white inhabitants, to whom his blackness meant that he was “simply a living wonder.”⁵² They all wanted to touch him, to feel his hair, and the kids, who referred to him as (in Swiss German) “Neger!” (81), adored him.⁵³ In the essay, Baldwin also describes the annual village custom of “buying” African natives “for the purpose of converting them to Christianity,” a process that

1 included collecting money to be forwarded to the missionaries in Africa, and
 2 children blackening their faces and dressing up as such happily bought and
 3 saved “natives.”⁵⁴ Both occurrences are housed within the same space; both
 4 place Baldwin in a position of a racialized object and the Swiss villagers in the
 5 position of oppressive, albeit uneducated and ignorant, racist Western subjects.
 6 Yet Baldwin is able to transcend these circumstances by means of placing them
 7 in a context that only he, a black American and cosmopolitan intellectual who
 8 is a unique creation of the West, is able to encompass, explicate, and express.

9 His precarious yet unique and enlightening location between Europe
 10 and America as a “[black] stranger in the [European] village” echoes the
 11 “monstrosity of a problem” he felt as a product of Harlem. This coming together
 12 of his earlier local and later international perspectives makes a poignant
 13 conclusion to this essay on race in unexpected places, and on places of racial
 14 martyrdom: “The syllable hurled behind me today (Neger! in Switzerland)
 15 expresses, above all, wonder: I am a stranger here. But I am *not* a stranger
 16 in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the
 17 *war* my presence has occasioned in the American soul.”⁵⁵ Still, he cautions,
 18 “The ideas on which American beliefs are based . . . came out of Europe . . .
 19 [including] the very warp and woof of the heritage of the West, the idea of
 20 white supremacy.”⁵⁶ Written just a year after Du Bois’s “The Negro and the
 21 Warsaw Ghetto” was published, Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village” marks his
 22 emergence from the United States and the ghetto, and ends with a confirma-
 23 tion of the distinctly Baldwinian brand of African American exceptionalism
 24 and cosmopolitanism: “[T]he history of the American Negro problem is not
 25 merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement [. . .] It is precisely
 26 this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in
 27 the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be
 28 white again.”⁵⁷

30 NOTES

- 31
- 32 1. Thanks are due the editors of the issue and Dr. Tayana Hardin for their comments
- 33 on this piece and assistance with its final version, and to Dr. Justine M. Pas for
- 34 “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto.”
- 35 2. James Baldwin, *Another Country: A Novel* (New York: Dial Press, 1962), 86.
- 36 3. David Leeming, “The White Problem: Tribute to James Baldwin,” *PEN:*
- 37 *America: Journal for Writers and Readers*, [http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/](http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/1079/prmID/1873)
- 38 [prmMID/1079/prmID/1873](http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/1079/prmID/1873). Accessed June 16, 2012.
- 39 4. I’m simplifying this complex argument for the sake of brevity (e.g., mass graves or
- 40 historical battle sites marked by hyper-visible memorials and plaques can be seen
- 41 as paradoxical, or extremely visible in their commemorative function and, at the
- 42 same time, anonymous in their omission of individual names.

5. Paul Gilroy, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 67. 1
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6. Too many to name, let me mention the sites of lynching documented by Ida B. Wells and Walter White, various scenes of flogging and violence against female and male slaves in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Du Bois’s theorization of the global color line in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Richard Wright’s fictional and journalistic depictions of violence, especially in *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), and *White Man, Listen!* (1957), as well as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). 3
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7. Gilroy, *Darker than Blue*, 69. See also Amiri Baraka on Baldwin and Du Bois in a reassessment of his views on the latter: “Like Du Bois, Jimmy Baldwin was attacked for being a social activist as well as an innovative grand master of thought and language.” Amiri Baraka, “Our Man Jimmy: Tribute to James Baldwin,” *PEN: America: Journal for Writers and Readers*, <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/1082/prmID/1502.html>. Accessed June 16, 2012. 10
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8. Baldwin’s essay, first published in February 1948, was later anthologized in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985*, 1–11. All subsequent references to the essay come from this collection. Du Bois’s piece appeared in *Jewish Life* as “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” and was later included, in bits and pieces that excluded the section on the ghetto memorial, in his autobiography (1968). All subsequent references to Du Bois’s essay come from the journal *Jewish Life* 6:7 (May 1952): 14–15, accessed June 16, 2012. 16
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9. See Charles M. Blow, “The Curious Case of Trayvon Martin,” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/17/opinion/blow-the-curious-case-of-trayvon-martin.html>. Accessed March 16, 2012. See also the Darius Simmons case by Kevin Powell, “The Fatal Racism that Shot Darius Simmons to Death,” *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/11/fatal-racism-shot-darius-simmons-death>. Accessed June 11, 2012. 23
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10. See Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968). He also wrote about his life in the earlier *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920) and *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1940). 29
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11. Harlem, New York, Baldwin’s native ground Negro Ghetto rioted in the same year. 35
12. Du Bois, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” 15. Emphasis added. 36
13. As he observes during his first visit, he was shocked at the “tyranny in school and work; insult in home and on the street” (*Autobiography*, 175). He also notes that he learned later the sad fate of his friend, “I never saw my schoolmate again, but heard later that in Second World War . . . In 1940 von Estreicher died in a German concentration camp” (175). 37
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14. Du Bois, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” 14. 42

- 1 15. The date Du Bois's text suggests is first described as "thirteen years after," but
 2 this must be a typographical error, for the context suggests that at least forty years
 3 elapsed after his first visit.
- 4 16. Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," 14.
- 5 17. Du Bois enjoyed a special status upon his visit in Germany, where German-born
 6 blacks were persecuted and sent to concentration camps. See Tina Campt, *Other*
 7 *Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third*
 8 *Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Clarence Lusane, *Hitler's*
 9 *Black Victims: The Historical Experiences of Afro-Germans, European Blacks, Africans*
 10 *and African Americans in the Nazi Era* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Because Du
 11 Bois was able to travel as a tourist through the Polish capital, his words indicate
 12 that he was perhaps becoming aware of the nebulous character of race. We could
 13 perhaps speculate that he might have been becoming aware of his own (unwitting?)
 14 complicity in race as a geopolitical and local construct, which tells him, and
 15 us, as much about race as about the darkness and horror that he beholds in the city
 16 and subsequently narrates for his New York Jewish audience.
- 17 18. Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," 14–15.
- 18 19. *Ibid.*, 15.
- 19 20. *Ibid.*, 15.
- 20 21. See Mark Rothberg, "W. E. B. Du Bois in Warsaw: Holocaust Memory and the
 21 Color Line," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (Spring 2001): 1, 169–89. See also,
 22 Benjamin Sevitch, "W. E. B. Du Bois and Jews: A Lifetime of Opposing Anti-
 23 Semitism," *The Journal of African American History* 87 (Summer 2002): 323–37.
- 24 22. Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," 15.
- 25 23. *Ibid.*, 15.
- 26 24. See Magdalena J. Zaborowska, Sibelan Forrester, and Elena Gapova, eds., Intro-
 27 duction to *Over the Wall/ After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures in the East-West*
 28 *Gaze* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 1–35.
- 29 25. Rothberg, "W. E. B. Du Bois in Warsaw," 173: "The period surrounding Du Bois's
 30 trip to Warsaw in 1949 and the eventual publication of the article in 1952 comprised
 31 the height of Cold War hysteria and of Du Bois's persecution by the United States
 32 government, as he was indicted in 1951 as an 'unregistered foreign agent.' Although
 33 not yet a party member, (he) was . . . closely aligned to Communism at the time
 34 and *Jewish Life* was a Communist Party journal. While it is easy, and perhaps at
 35 times necessary, to criticize the Stalinism of intellectual and activist figures like
 36 Du Bois and the editors of *Jewish Life*, bracketing our post-Cold War sensibilities
 37 can also produce unexpected insight into issues of history and memory."
- 38 26. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 3.
- 39 27. Du Bois's insistence on the centrality of the "Negro problem" echoes *Darkwater's*
 40 "Credo" as well: "Especially do I believe in the Negro Race: in the beauty of its
 41 genius, the sweetness of its soul, and its strength in that meekness which shall yet
 42 inherit this turbulent earth" (*Darkwater*, 3).

28. Baldwin echoed Du Bois’s ideas, and specifically, “[A]ll men are brothers” [sic] in several of his works. 1
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29. Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto,” 1. 3
30. Baldwin, “The Price of the Ticket,” xiii. 4
31. *Ibid.*, xiii. 5
32. Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto,” 1–2. The lore of white writing on Harlem is vast, so let me refer to one notorious example, Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” in *Dissent Magazine*’s summer 1957 issue. Baldwin critiqued brilliantly the essay in his “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” (1961; the essay was anthologized in *The Price of the Ticket*, 289–303; Lorraine Hansberry discusses it in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969) as a piece on “Harlem” and “an absurdity” that Mailer “locked himself in” (208). 6
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33. *Ibid.*, 2. 14
34. *Ibid.*, 1. Metaphors of claustrophobia and the closet appear frequently in Baldwin’s early works that deal openly with homosexuality, such as essays “Preservation of Innocence” (1949) and “Gide as Husband and Homosexual” (1954); “The Harlem Ghetto” refers to sexuality only obliquely, but can be read as implying a connection between the vilified Jews and homosexuals. See also Zaborowska, “Mapping Transcultural Masculinities: James Baldwin’s Innocents Abroad, or *Giovanni’s Room* Revisited,” in *Other Americans, Other Americas: The Politics and Poetics of Multiculturalism*, ed., Magdalena J. Zaborowska (Aarhus and Oxford: Aarhus University Press, 1998) 119–31. 15
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35. Baldwin was also straddling blackness and queerness. See Zaborowska, “Mapping Transcultural Masculinities”; *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). 24
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36. James Baldwin, Introduction to *The Price of the Ticket*, xvi. Having achieved fame and notoriety, he came back as a visitor, usually in a hired limo because, as he remarks in *No Name in the Street* (1971), “I have . . . been forbidden to expose myself to the quite tremendous hazards of getting a cab to stop for me in New York” (reprinted in *The Price of the Ticket*, 456). 27
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37. Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto,” 1. 32
38. *Ibid.*, 3. The following quotation is also found on p. 3. 33
39. *Ibid.*, 7. 34
40. *Ibid.*, 7. 35
41. Baldwin, “The Harlem Ghetto,” 3; remaining quotations in this paragraph can be found on p. 7. See also Catherine Rottenberg’s discussion on Black-Jewish encounters in *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2008). Her discussion of “the ways in which the black-and-white divide has operated” and the “uncertainty surrounding the racial position of the Jew at the turn of the century” (74) are especially helpful to situating the historical and 36
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- 1 literary historical contexts for my argument. Inexplicably, Rottenberg does not
 2 include Baldwin in her discussion.
- 3 42. Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," 7.
- 4 43. *Ibid.*, 9.
- 5 44. *Ibid.*, 11.
- 6 45. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
- 7 46. *Ibid.*, 11.
- 8 47. *Ibid.*, 11.
- 9 48. *Ibid.*, 9.
- 10 49. *Ibid.*, 10. Baldwin's interest in the complicated relationship between the Negro and
 11 Jews stemmed also from his close personal friendships with artists and intellectuals
 12 he met at the DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, the friendships that
 13 were opposed by his devout father, and that Jimmy cultivated until his death (e.g.,
 14 with Sol Stein and Richard Avedon). Baldwin's early study of black-Jewish-white
 15 relationships in Harlem of the 1930s and 1940s echoes especially powerfully in the
 16 racialized portrayals of characters in *Another Country* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*,
 17 which depict both blacks making anti-Semitic comments and Jews who exhibit
 18 racist and sexist behavior (e.g., Steve Ellis in the former and Fonny's friend Daniel
 19 in the latter).
- 20 50. I am simplifying Du Bois's views on the place of Jews in Europe and the United
 21 States; at the same time, it is significant that he expressed his views on this issue
 22 most clearly in "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto." See also Sander Gilman's
 23 work on Jews as Europe's Africans.
- 24 51. Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," 15, emphasis added.
- 25 52. James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 81, anthologized in *The Price of the*
 26 *Ticket*, 79–90.
- 27 53. This can be seen in the footage from a Swiss television program whose excerpts
 28 were included in Karen Thorsen's California Newsreel 1989 documentary, *The Price*
 29 *of the Ticket*.
- 30 54. Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 82.
- 31 55. *Ibid.*, 85, emphasis added.
- 32 56. *Ibid.*, 87.
- 33 57. *Ibid.*, 90. A topic for another essay, certainly, but it is worth noting that blanketing
 34 of Europe as uniformly white, in the past or present, is not accurate.
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