

James Baldwin's
book *The Fire Next Time*
and its relevance
in the twenty-first
century...



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Published in 1962, James Baldwin's book, *The Fire Next Time* is a book that reflects on the African-American experience during the Civil Rights Era. Now, over fifty years since its original publication and amidst many contemporary discussions concerning race and equality in the United States, many of the ideas that Baldwin speaks on feel once again relevant. In the following paper, I will argue that the central ideas and themes in Baldwin's book *The Fire Next Time* are indeed still relevant in the 21st century, not only because he speaks to broad concerns of the human spirit, but because Baldwin was contending with issues that are still existent in modern American society. By examining recent studies, statistics, and news stories, I will show that concerns of the 1960's Black American are still very much alive today, that Baldwin's work is not irrelevant or dead, and — perhaps most importantly — that there is value in examining history for commentary on modern concerns.

To begin, I will discuss several core themes and ideas that Baldwin explores in *The Fire Next Time*. Broadly, the ideas in Baldwin's book usually comment on some combination of two topics: 1) some aspect of universal human experience, and 2) concerns as they apply specifically to the Black American. Generally, I found he most often directs his commentary towards the latter — which makes sense; he often speaks to and about the Black American, as a Black American. But this does not mean that Baldwin shies away from touching on larger truths as they apply to society and humanity. For example, two broader “big picture” concepts he touched on that stuck out were how people think of and treat death and on love in context of hate. In this way, Baldwin doesn't just provide commentary on finite, contextual

issues but actually attempts to provide an explanation of the psychology that leads the American society to the specific challenges it faces as well as the reactions it has to such challenges. I mention the existence of these broader ideas now for several reasons. First, the existence of such commentary was the first evidence to me as reader and scholar that Baldwin's ideas have not died with the times. When one can speak so effectually on universal concerns — universal themes that bridge through every human experience (after all, we are all ultimately subject to both love and death) — it is a first sign to me that his words would hold against the test of time. More important, however, and perhaps more pertinent to a rigorous academic inspection, were Baldwin's central ideas that spoke on topics of race and racism in America and their apparent causes. There are three central ideas on these topics that I will describe in this paper, but do note that there are, of course, other themes and ideas that Baldwin spoke on. The following are simply those that I found most compelling and relevant in 21st century American society.

First of these central ideas is that narrow-minded thinking and biases propagated both knowingly and unknowingly by White people is the largest roadblock to progress, as it molds the minds of both Black Americans about themselves as well as White America's expectations of them. Baldwin (1962) eloquently speaks on this saying: They [white men] have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know.

In this way, the negative image of Black America, despite being “known” to be false, despite being legislated against, is difficult to truly dispel, and without explicit attempts to destroy this negative image, progress cannot be made. To examine whether this core idea is still relevant and important in the 21st century, it seems important to first ask if such narrow-minded thinking about Black America still exists. In other words, do people still believe that being Black means being “a worthless human being” who is “not expected to aspire to excellence”? Are such stereotypes of the Black American still alive today? The answer, unfortunately, is yes. According to an AP poll reported on by USA Today, “...51% of Americans now express explicit anti-black attitudes...”. What exactly “anti-black attitudes” mean, however, is not clear. If we examine data provided by researchers at the University of Illinois, however, we can get a better idea of specific modern perceptions of Black America. According to their data from a 2012 survey, over 20% of White respondents perceived White people as more intelligent than Black people. In addition, over 30% of White respondents reported that they believed that White people work harder than Black people. The study also showed that the majority of modern Black Americans perceive that inequality is rooted in Black individuals not trying hard enough, with a little over 50% agreeing with that statement.

Based on these recent studies on the American perception of blackness, it is safe to say that stereotypical thinking and negative bias against Black ability and effort still exists today. The next question is whether or not such ideas actually impact Black Americans in negative ways. According to several studies related to education and employer perception, the answer is again

yes. In a study done for the *Journal of African American Men*, researcher Herbert L. Foster (1995) found that in teachers and non-teachers alike, there is still plenty of existent stereotypical thinking about Black male students. In another study coming out of John Hopkins, it was revealed that "...non-black teachers have significantly lower educational expectations for black students than black teachers do". If we examine graduation rates from the National Center for Education Statistics, we can see that such expectations are not entirely unfounded. " Nationwide, black students graduated at a rate of 69 percent; Hispanics graduated at 73 percent; whites graduated at a rate of 86 percent". While it is difficult to point to the reason for such troubling statistics, it is indicative of existent inequity both in the way people think about Black ability and in the actual rates at which the Black American is able to succeed in existing institutions. Unsurprisingly, negative perceptions don't just affect education, but they also affect the job market. In a study done by Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan (2003), they found that traditional " black" names were less likely to get a return on a resume compared to names perceived as traditionally " white." In these ways, we can see that not only do narrow-minded thinking and biases still exist in American society in the 21st century but also that these ideas shape the perception of Black America and directly impact Black American's ability to succeed and actualize themselves in the world. From this, we can see that Baldwin's idea about the impact of stereotyping being a major road block to progress is still a relevant and important concern for modern America.

Next, I will examine another central idea that Baldwin discusses, which is the relationship between power and whiteness. Namely, Baldwin (1962) sees

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that the power of whiteness lies in the institutions we trust to hand down justice — namely, through the police and the criminal justice system.

Baldwin implies that it is through these systems that racism and injustice can be widely enacted, and, because these are systems we are meant to trust, it makes their abuse towards the Black population all the more immoral: In any case, white people, who had robbed black people of their liberty and who profited by this theft every hour that they lived, had no moral ground on which to stand. They had the judges, the juries, the shotguns, the law — in a word, power. But it was a criminal power, to be feared but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever. In this way, Baldwin saw the justice system at the time as having an inherent bias towards Black people that ultimately did not bring justice for Black Americans. The words “shotguns” necessarily brings up images of violence and death — all at the hand of the government.

In the above quote, we see that at the time Baldwin saw the American justice system as necessarily being in the hands of White America. Today, this is still largely true. Of the nine current Supreme Court Justices (as of December 10, 2017), only one is African American, and of the 112 Justices that have served over the history of the United States, only two (1.78%) have been African-American: Thurgood Marshall (began serving in 1967) and Clarence Thomas (began serving in 1991). With the Black population making up approximately 13% of the overall US population as of 2016, this means our highest courts in the land have not been adequately representing Black Americans. What about other facets of the US justice system? When it comes to police officers, approximately 12% are Black. Similarly, approximately 12% of state judges

are Black. This means Black Americans are proportionately represented in these two jobs. However, according to the U. S. Department of Justice, in 2013, 37% of the male US prison population were Black; for the same year, 22% of the female US prison population was Black. Both of these percentages show that while the percentage of Black police officers and Black judges closely matches the overall percent of Black people in the general US population, the percentage of incarcerated Black Americans is extremely disproportionate when compared to the percentage of Black people in the general US population. This is significant on its own but is even more striking when put in perspective of White representation in the same areas. Approximately 77% of the general US population is White but only 32% of the male prison population and 49% of the female prison population is White. Additionally, approximately 78% of police officers are White, and approximately 70% of judges are White. So while both White and Black populations are proportionately represented in the office of judges and police officers, White people are massively underrepresented in the prison population; conversely, Black people are extremely overrepresented in the prison population.

These statistics suggest that the institutions of power — specifically those related to the execution of “ justice” — still do not result in fair treatment of Black Americans. With these statistics in mind, this point is brought into even sharper relief when we consider the dozens of cases of Black Americans being killed or brutalized by police in recent years. In 2016, the LA Times reported on what it called “ only a handful” of the wrongful deaths of Black Americans by the police; in all, the LA Times article cited twenty Black

American deaths between 2012 and 2016 as examples of wrongful killings. Some names such as Freddie Gray, Michael Brown Jr., Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, are likely familiar to readers as these stories and others attracted a lot of media attention. With these examples of injustice happening all around us, it is easy to see that Baldwin's ideas surrounding power, whiteness, and our institutions of justice are still extremely relevant in 21st century America. Finally, I will examine one last central idea from Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. This idea is the idea of integration and identity. Throughout his book, Baldwin (1962) discusses the idea that Black America should not and does not want to integrate into White American society. This is because integration implies a rejection of Black identity as inferior and an acceptance of White identity as "normal." Baldwin speaks on this saying, "There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you". In this way, Baldwin recommends against disappearing into the White American society and accommodating the way the White people think Black people should be.

This idea is perhaps one of the most striking points in the book, both because of its general pervasiveness as well as its presence and relevance in modernity. In a piece by Orlando Edmonds (2016), Edmonds connects Baldwin's idea of authentic integration with the Black Lives Matter movement. Here, he argues that the Black Lives Matter movement's attitude is a modern embodiment of Baldwin's thoughts on Black integration. In the article, Edmonds quotes Patrisse Cullors who speaks on the Black authenticity in Black Lives Matter: "The old civil rights really upheld the

narrative around 'respectability,' around what we're supposed to look like and be like. Folks in Ferguson said, "No, we're not your respectable Negro, we are going to sag our pants, are going to be ratchet, and we're okay with that." We believe that have to show up in our full-selves, without closeting parts of ourselves, marginalizing parts of ourselves, and build together."

Here, there is an emphasis on accepting and loving what it can mean to be Black, even if those qualities are not accepted or seen as positive by White America. In this way, the Black Lives Matter movement fundamentally rejects the idea that there is something wrong with aspects of Black identity simply because they don't fit into what White people have deemed as normal and appropriate. And interestingly enough, Baldwin has something to say about why White identity tries to assert its power and opinion over Black identity. On the topic he writes, "White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want" and "...the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity". These points are particularly poignant in modernity as we see the rise of neo-Nazi groups, white nationalism, and the idea of the Alternative Right around America. Hauntingly, Baldwin's writing comes alive before our eyes as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) defines the Alt-Right saying, "The Alternative Right, commonly known as the Alt-Right, is a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack...". In these ways, it is obvious the ideas surrounding integration and identity struggle are extremely relevant today.

In conclusion, James Baldwin's work *The Fire Next Time* has words that are still relevant and important today as evidenced by studies, statistics, new stories, and movements throughout modern day America. It is with a certain reluctance that I have defended this thesis, not because I wish Baldwin to be wrong, but because to see Baldwin's words in today's reality is to see the bias, racism, and problematic power structures from over 50 years ago still alive and well in modern society. Through the studies, statistics, new stories, and movements explored in this paper, it is clear that Baldwin's central ideas can be confirmed not just by anecdotal evidence and stories of people's experience, but by hard numbers and scientific studies of the reality of living as a Black American in the 21st Century. Future research may be able to explore the ways in which Baldwin's words then have impacted the now, because though it is clear that his words are still relevant, I wonder what impact, if any, Baldwin may have had in influencing the way we speak, conceptualize, and ultimately think of the progress made and yet to be made towards true equality.