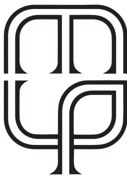

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INTERVIEW

"You Know What's Cool about James Baldwin, Man?": An Interview with Cecil Brown

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Abstract

Cecil Brown is nearing eighty years old and starting new projects all the time. He is currently writing a historical novel about the life of the enslaved poet George Moses Horton and a memoir about his friendship with James Baldwin. He met Baldwin early in his career, during a trip to Europe after the translation of his first novel, *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger* (1969) [trans. *La vie et les amours de Mr. Jiveass le Nègre*, 1972]. They remained friends until Baldwin's death in 1987. This interview collates several conversations about Baldwin that took place in December 2022 and January 2023. Brown reflects on their relationship, on Baldwin's influence for him personally, and on the meaning of Black cultural celebrity more broadly; he also touches on Baldwin's situation between Black Power and Black feminism, and the ramifications of the politics of the 1970s for the present.

Keywords: Cecil Brown, James Baldwin, masculinity, Black feminism, literary fiction, memoir

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Cecil Brown and I came into contact as a result of our shared interest in the work of George Moses Horton, a nineteenth-century poet who lived most of his life in slavery in North Carolina. Brown's sense of vocation as a writer had been oriented by learning about Horton during his own childhood in segregated rural North Carolina. During the course of our conversations about Horton, Brown let me know that he had also been reflecting on his relationship with James Baldwin. What follows is less an attempt to set the biographical record straight, and more a meditation on Baldwin's significance within the wider ambits of American and African-American literature, for Brown's generation, and for young people today.

Matt Sandler: Let's start by talking about the memoir you're working on about Baldwin.

Cecil Brown: The manuscript is a memoir that I wrote about meeting Jimmy. And then it turned out that I had kind of met him in different places.

So, I met him in France. Then I went back home, and then I met him again when he came here to Berkeley. Because he said, "I'll visit you." And I didn't know that that was his way, and that he would actually show up. So I got a call from him and he said, "I'm in Berkeley. I'm at the Marrakech." The Marrakech was a little place, a student place. But it meant something to Jimmy because he lived in Marrakech. So I went down and picked him up. I remember he said, "Cecil's landed on his feet, and he's living the California life." And that kind of stuck with me. And he had a meeting with Huey, Huey P. Newton, and he asked me to go along with him.

At the top of eighties, I decided to go to Europe. Something happened, I think Richard [Pryor] got burned. And I was feeling kind of like, I'm going to start all over again. I'm going to sell my car and just go to Europe, and learn how to be a filmmaker from Fassbinder. But when I got to Berlin, they told me, "Oh, we have bad news for you." I said, "What do you mean?" "Fassbinder died." But I met a lot of the people that worked with Fassbinder. And I developed a film project, based on the Chekov short story "The Lady with the Lapdog," which I got kind of fascinated by, but in the meanwhile, I met some filmmakers who wanted to make a film with Jimmy. So I called Jimmy, and he came to Berlin. These guys had a lot of money, and again, they took care of him, paid him, actually cash money. And one of the things people remember is that Jimmy rolled his money up and put it in his sock. He didn't use banks, man. He had a sock, that was like gangster style.

Then I went back home again, and Jimmy came to Berkeley, and he had a tour where he went around to different places and

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gave talks. A friend of mine had a party for him in Hollywood. And then he and I went around and met his old buddies—Billy Dee Williams, and a whole slew of them that he had known when he worked on the film about Malcolm X.[1]

And then he left again. And then the last time I saw him was the South of France. And this was in 1987, which is the year he died.

MS: So can we go back to before these meetings? What role did he play in your formation as a writer? What did you know about Baldwin before you met him?

CB: Well, that's a good question because I relate my first interest in Baldwin to A&T College dormitory in 1960, 1961.[2] Now, it's called North Carolina College University. But then it was A&T. It was the place in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the sit-in took place. And Baldwin came up because we had bull sessions; bull sessions was where everybody on your floor will end up in your room playing chess, eating baloney sandwiches, talking trash, and talking about everything we couldn't talk about in class. Well, we would talk about Baldwin. He'd published a first novel, and in 1961 or 2, I also read *Another Country*.[3] And *Another Country* was eye-opening, and because, see, I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know what being a writer … I certainly didn't know what being in Paris or anything like that was. But I was with some real smart guys, and we started a literary club called the Stylus, and I was the president.

MS: That's what Edgar Allan Poe was going to name his magazine.

CB: Oh, really? That makes sense. And I wrote a thing called "The Philosophy of the Stylus," and we published that. And so to us Jimmy always was kind of like the preeminent writer … "the master," as I used to call him to friends. So, what we were dealing with as students at A&T, each person that went in the sit-in had their own private experience in our community of someone telling you, or something telling you, or a location telling you that socially, you're not considered part of the American scene. You were an aberration. In fact, we used to argue a lot. There's a section in Richard Wright's *The Long Dream*, where the young Black boys are talking to each other and they are putting each other down. Well, they don't leave any doubt about how inferior you are. They would bring you down and let you know you are nothing, man. You are nobody. Everybody had a beef with that kind of language, but everybody was used to it. Right? You didn't fool yourself about that. It was part the culture, so well-observed by everybody in subtle, unsubtle, all kinds of ways.

MS: So you graduate, move to New York to become a writer, then how did you come to meet Baldwin for the first time in Europe?

CB: I was in Paris in a café and I was enjoying it, man. I think I had some money. And I had forty reviews in French for that book, *Jiveass*. And so a guy came to me and said, "Are you Cecil Brown?" I said, "Yeah." And he said, "James

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Baldwin would like to meet you." So that's how I met him. And so, in a café in Paris, in Deux Magots—or not Deux Magots?—but in one of those. He set up the arrangement, and I was supposed to meet him at in this hotel, which I did.

See, when my books were published by Gallimard, a big-time publisher, man, that book was published in six languages, almost simultaneously. French, Italian, Japanese, and the whole nine, man. So when I was called to duty, I thought that happened *every* time you wrote a book! I didn't know it was *Jiveass*. I was just dragged into the thing, man.

MS: And you were 26 at the time?

CB: Yeah. So they invited me over. They had a party for me. And the guy who had the party was gay. And I didn't know that. So I was always trying to speak my French, man. So I said to him, "*Où est votre femme?* Where's your wife?" And then everybody laughed, and he said, "I don't have a wife." So I said, "Oh shit, man, I didn't know." Because I'm naive, and I'm an American. I didn't know that these guys are all gay. So I was introduced to Jimmy Baldwin, and then Jimmy took over, because he had his own everything. He had been there, the city was his, he had all his friends set up. He introduced me to this one and that one. Jimmy had a bunch of friends in Paris who were white American writers. I met a lot of writers that I didn't know before. I obviously knew their work. So when Roger Straus [of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux] came to town, he invited all of his writers. I met a lot of South American writers, Carlos Fuentes, all kind of people through Roger, because I was one of his writers. He was a great guy.

You see, these publishing houses that I'm talking about, the people who run them now, they're lightweights, man. They don't have that gravitas. These guys now are just hustlers, man. They just got a degree, they don't know shit. And they're not exceptional, you see? We would go on the weekends to James Jones's house, and James Jones would have all of his people there.[4] But everybody who entered the house, they were writers who made a lot of money from writing big books. What people write now, I don't know, but this was a different breed of American writers. Maybe this was the end of it. I'm sure it was kind of the end of that.

MS: Yeah, I think they could make money writing literary fiction in a way that you can't anymore.

CB: Right. And so that was what it was. Well, one night when I was there … Jimmy introduced me, I started going by, hanging out with these people on my own. So the phone rang, and the secretary, servant or whatever, said, "Mr. Baldwin, Mr. Baldwin on the line, and he wants everybody to come down to…" "Where is he?" "He's in the disco, blah, blah." "We're not going to go down there." They're all drinking scotch and playing bid whist, and looking at the Seine, and eating and carrying on. So I said, "I'll go." So of course, I go down there and knocked, you had a password you gave to the person, and they let you in. And there was Jimmy enjoying himself. He

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preferred hanging with a younger, crazier, drinking, fun-loving crowd. It was something I could not imagine. In fact, when I got down to South of France, he took me to a party, and he passed a joint to me and said, "I can't wait to read about this in your next novel." And we had great laughs, really wonderful laughs. And of course, his lifestyle was the complete opposite of what it was in America. It gave him a real power. I was impressed by Jimmy's ability to make money from his writing, and to live on such a high level. I didn't meet anybody who was not impressed by James Baldwin. They don't exist, bro. They didn't exist in Europe.

So I'll give you one example, if my old lady listened to me, she'll get real mad when I tell her this. But when I was staying with Jimmy one day, I was walking, just walking along, and this beautiful car pulled up to me. And just imagine, beautiful South of France, French woman. She said, "Excuse me, would you like to have a ride?" And I was like, "Fuck, okay. What dream is this?" She said, "Are you a friend of Jimmy?" I said, "Yes, I am." "Oh, please, let me take you. Where would you like to go? I will…"

I got in the car, man. Just like that. And that was because of James Baldwin, it wasn't because of my Black ass. She suspected that James Baldwin had a friend visiting. That's all. And so she was like, "Oh, I want you to know that he is a friend of ours and we like him. And then you are a friend of his. So where would you like to go? I have time to talk with you and be with you, or whatever." I'm telling you that story because that's the impression Jimmy had made on people around him. And when I finally met up with Jimmy and told him what happened, he said, "I knew you would like the South of France." That's why I forgot to write my girlfriend for like a month. When I was with Jimmy, I forgot, man. I literally fucking forgot. But he understood the puritanism of American life, and our denial of our shared urges as men.

I'm not saying he had the same kind of respect in New York. But in the South of France, he had quite a home. That's what I can say. See, first of all, Jimmy is surrounded by beautiful women, because they didn't feel he wanted something from them. They liked him because he's a great talker. He was famous. So they'd come by and see him, right?

MS: I'm curious how the two of you talked about literature. Are there conversations with him that you remember, or things that you took from him about writing in particular?

CB: Oh yeah, when I got down there, one of the things that Ray [Frost, Baldwin's secretary at the time] used to do was to drive Jimmy up to the top of the mountain where business was, where he did banking. There's an old town of Saint-Paul-de-Vence, which is the more interesting part where Jimmy lived. But when you went up the mountain, there was a modern part. So Jimmy had to go there, but he didn't drive. And of course, he had a beautiful black Mercedes, six doors. And it was like a limo. And I drove him, but he wouldn't get in the front seat. He'd get in the back because he liked being driven. I mean, this is, anybody who knows Jimmy, he likes being driven. Because he

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likes getting out. And when he got out of that black limo Mercedes, it was like a movie star, literally a movie star. And that's how he liked to present himself. But as we drove up, we would talk about literature. So I'm educated in literature, and Jimmy is even more. He didn't read a lot of books, but he read them thoroughly, and again and again and again. He read [James] Fenimore Cooper over and over again. Once I went to see him in the hospital, he had a little minor something. And he was in bed. He had Fenimore Cooper. And I said, "Man, what are you reading that for?" He said, "Well, you know you got to find out when it first started." When it first started, what he meant was the contamination of our culture. That the first writers were like Fenimore Cooper, who would exploit the Native Americans, and start creating the stereotypes of the lie. The truth, they didn't come here to civilize Natives. They came here to kill the Natives and enslave the Blacks.

MS: Rape and pillage.

CB: To rape and pillage. And Jimmy had a fascination for rape and pillage. So he knew the works of Melville, Cooper, the early American writers. All right. He also knew French literature too. He was a Balzacian guy like me. And we could make reference to things that he found fascinating about the French people. He loved a particular book from a guy called Boris Vian. He wrote a book called *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (1947) [trans., *I Spit on Your Graves*]. Well, Jimmy liked him. I think he might have met him. And he said that Boris Vian was the first writer who could write about blackness without Blacks. And that plot was so devastating because of the cultural implications, and that they didn't know that Boris Vian was not Black.

Anyway, his interest in American literature centered around the kind of stories that Ralph Ellison wrote. He loved "Cadillac Flambé." He loved most Ellison stuff, but he thought Ellison was stuffy. And he didn't have much admiration for Richard Wright, as one could see in looking at his essay "Many Thousands Gone." That was because Baldwin agreed with Michele Wallace that Black men play a part in white men's lives only when they're brutal, like Bigger Thomas.[5] But what he did like about Richard Wright was that great novel that was published posthumously, *Lawd Today*, about one day in the life of these four guys in Chicago. It's written in an incredible vernacular, really celebrates vernacular in an amazing way. He really admired Richard Wright, but not the ones he's famous for. *Lawd Today*, that one he loved.

MS: Those mid-century Black literary heroes, Ellison and Wright alongside Baldwin, make me wonder how you see their work within a larger story of African American literature and Black culture more generally?

CB: Well, you know Black literature and Black culture exists to be hustled. And that's my latest complaint—the way the Black people are ignored themselves, for what people can use from our culture. The books, the culture material that we brought forth through the struggle to desegregate is amazing. Baldwin and those guys were constantly talking about that. Constantly.

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If I had a chance to miss it, they were going to remind me of it before I got away with it. Because it was, appreciate your cultural heritage, protect it, look out for it. It's you, it's who you are. And I think one of the reasons he was able to do that was because he left the country. Even now, it's very difficult for Black people to give their real bearings on our situation, because they live in the country.

If you are in the house and you're trying to improve the house, you are living in it, but you're trying to make it better. So, you kind of have to move to one room while you work on another room. You don't have the option to get out of the house going on vacation, and then come back and it's reconstructed. You got to reconstruct it while you live in it. And that's the condition Black people are in right now. And you can see it in the Georgia election. It's just that half of the people are ignorant crackers, and the other half want to help. But how can you deal with it when you got one group of white people getting one Black man to run against another Black man who represent another group of white people? So that's what the conundrum is in cultural studies, too. At least that's how I see it.

And you know what's really cool about James Baldwin? It's just so good to read him. Man, if you read *Another Country*, fucking incredible, man. And even the last one, the last one, *Just Above My Head* (1976), he came to my fucking house, and he said to me … He pulled out his bag, this was in Berkeley, and he plopped it on my desk. And he said, Jimmy said to me, "So you want to be a writer?"

MS: It seems like you're reflecting on the men of your generation: Baldwin, Pryor, and Eldridge Cleaver, but also Norman Mailer and Marshall McLuhan. So, what are the problems in that legacy that you're still thinking through?

CB: Looking at things in retrospect, it's clear. At the time, there was the emergence of African American Southern students who raised a lot of questions, and the fact that they didn't use violence formed the basis of all the things that kind of happened between then and now. It was so easy, then, to relate to violence. I was looking at a copy of a book, poetry from Langston Hughes, and the title was *The Panther and the Lash* (1967). They're probably very innocuous now, but then it pitted the black panther, which is a symbol of violence, against this other violent symbol of the lash.

In the 1970s, Raymond Saunders wrote an essay, it was widely published, from the point of view of a painter. And he said, "Black is a color." When that came out, man, he got so many Black critics, painters, calling him an Uncle Tom, just because he had a title of an essay he wrote about black paintings. He said, "Black is a color," which it is, a color. But the fact that he put it in those terms caused everybody to rise up against him: "He is an Uncle Tom."

The reason why I bring that up is that both of those incidents are kind of innocent: one is about poetry, one is about painting. But the very notion of

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black implied a kind of anger, an anti-Uncle Tom stance. You have to really look seriously at that time in terms of race because it was the desegregation of America. But it just indicates to all of us that white supremacy, and now you have other names for it, it might be called narcissism, like Marshall McLuhan was saying with the reaction that people had to the innovation of technology is like a narcissism.

Mailer found this out, that you could do all these things. You could write a book called *An American Dream* (1965). You could kill your wife on the first page. You can throw a Black man downstairs. You can be the most heinous person in the world, but in the end of the book, you get away with it because you have white privilege. And this endeared him to the reader … People got the idea, not only can you be like a white negro, but you can get away with it. And so I think it's continued.

I think Baldwin's right, what condemns us is violence. And it's a hard one for Americans to get. So that's where I'm at.

MS: I'm curious about Baldwin and sexuality. I feel like you guys must have seen one another on the level of honesty about sexuality. Did you talk about that?

CB: See, when I got to Europe, I was probably at my height. I'm pretty confident, when I met Jimmy, I was already a writer. It wasn't like I didn't know which way was up. I did. The thing is, what amazed me about Jimmy was he was able, as a gay person, to operate in a world that I didn't know anything about. He had power, and I was asking him about that.

MS: And you associated that power with him being gay?

CB: Well, being able to deal in whatever world he was dealing in. That's what I was impressed by. I still am, because when I go over, the last part of my current book, I wrote a lot about the house … Because you got to remember, that house was the best property in South of France. At that time, it was an old house, but it was on a very big, beautiful piece of property from which they experiment … The best perfume came from Jim's garden, man. They had these flowers that were there for centuries. They cultivated them.

MS: So you saw in him like a different kind of masculine power that's not about violence in some way?

CB: Right. I'm not sure what his relationship was in an intimate way with men. But for the general population, for all of rest of us, he was always manly. What I saw in Jimmy was the exuberance of life. So, when I came down there, I got off the train. I was late because this French woman who had showed me around, and we spent a whole day hanging out. So, when I finally got to where Jimmy was, he picked me up and he said, "We going to a party, and what happened to you?" I told him, he said, "Oh, see, I told you you'd love the South of France." At that time, of course, that was back in the day when it was expected. Part of being in the South of France, or being in Europe, as I discovered, was the *joie de vivre*. I think Jimmy certainly represented that to me.

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MS: So, he was liberated, in a sense.

CB: Totally.

MS: I think of you as a comic writer, and I don't think of Baldwin as funny. I'm curious where humor fits in for you two together, whether you guys talked about humor, how you think about humor as a reaction to the historical moment you two shared.

CB: I think Jimmy had a great sense of humor. It was in everyday life and in how he used language to express or encapsulate meaning for interchanges. He was not like Richard [Pryor], a satirist who would just cut your throat, but his was more endearing. He never liked to put people down because he picked them right back up.

I know his remarks on Mailer were really true when he said that it wasn't Norman's fault; the way he was was not completely his own fault. He just had too many excuses, too many excuses in life not to be a really great writer. Jimmy took himself … As I said, maybe to you, his writing salon was the one that Braque, the great painter and sculptor, made possible. Jimmy had worked right in that same space that Braque did. He called the place his "torture chamber." But that was his way, his kind of humor.

Also, I think Jim was at the beginning of something you might call post-modernism, in that one time when I came down to see him, he just got back from America, where he'd been teaching at the college … I think it was Amherst. I said, "Wow, what have you been teaching?" He said, "American literature." "Who?" "T. S. Eliot." "A T. S. Eliot what?" "Wasteland." I laughed. I thought that was so funny, man.

But I listened to the poetry that he left from this album and it is like Eliot.[6] It's very much in the style of "Waste Land." The narrator telling the story was very rhythmically attuned and prophetic and all of the Eliot stuff. He really liked that. He brings it off, too, because it's over Miles Davis's music. He and Miles were really good friends.

Miles would come down and visit with Jimmy, and they would be in the house alone, the two of them. They're about the same size, in a way. Both in a way, Jimmy shy. Miles really enjoyed hanging out with Jimmy because they were similar in temperament. When they were together, they could really be quiet or be together however way they wanted to. So that's how I kind of … and then I ended reaffirming this view that's confirmed by David Linx.[7] Mostly Europeans, who look at him as a very advanced, informed about intersection between race, sex, country, and love of self, and all the above.

MS: Did Baldwin and Pryor have a connection?[8]

CB: Oh, yeah … Around 1979, 1980, 1981, Jimmy was invited to give a tour of California. They gave him a gig. It had a title to it. I forgot what it was called. But he went and gave several speeches. When he got to LA, we met up and that's when he wanted to talk to Richard. He insisted that I get Richard on the phone, he wanted to go over and meet him. So, I called Richard, and

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Jennifer (Pryor's girlfriend at the time) answered and she kept saying, "Well, Richard can't come to the phone." Jimmy grabbed the phone from me and said, "Listen," that was the first time he ever … it kind of shocked me. He said, "Listen, bitch. I want to talk to my brother." Like that, man. He was real pissed off. But underlying, Jimmy always felt close to every Black person who had done anything. He said it like that. "I want to talk to my brother." He was very serious about Richard. When I told him how Richard had gotten burned up, he was very upset about it.

When Jimmy was here, Maya Angelou, who he was very close to, invited him up to dinner. Of course, he invited me and a couple other people. We all went up to Maya's house. She had this beautiful house in art deco from the twenties and everything was meticulous, Jimmy was telling this story and he kept using the M-F word. Maya interrupted Jimmy and said, "Now Jimmy, you know this is a Christian house, and we don't use those words here, and please restrain yourself." He said, "Okay, Maya. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." And then he would turn around to the people he was talking to, and he said, "Anyway, I told the motherfucker that I didn't know what he was talking about!" And she said, "Oh, Jimmy, please!" It went back and forth like that.

But he was very funny about that kind of stuff. He was born in the church, so to speak, but he didn't take it so serious. Not serious as Maya did, of course.

Now, Toni [Morrison] was a different story. Toni was much more sophisticated about words like that than, I guess, Maya would have been. Toni had spent Christmas with Jimmy, too, in the past. I mean, they were really seasoned friends. So, I don't think she would've had any problems with him saying "motherfucker" in her house.

MS: Would you speculate about what Baldwin saw in Pryor?

CB: Oh, I think the sacrilege or the kind of … What I wanted to say, I almost used that word *panache* from de Bergerac, the fuck you; up yours; kiss my rich, happy Black ass. To give life itself one more sock in its eye was something I think that Jimmy would admire in Richard's real, victorious gesture, shall we say, his "up yours" to fate and reality. I think Jimmy respected that in Pryor…

MS: What was Baldwin like in conversation?

CB: A couple times, at the end of speeches he gave in Berkeley, were periods where audiences were asked to ask him questions. I found that Jimmy's responses were kind of a genre. It was how to turn a question around to give the questioner another view of what he was really asking. One question was a young father wanted to know what to do about his Black son, who seemed to think that white people were somehow superior to Blacks. Jimmy's answer somehow unraveled the father's questioning and led him to actually begin to ask what was he really asking. What he really was asking was the way he was raising his child to give him the impression that whites were superior to him. You know what I'm saying? I've never seen anything like that.

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At the famous house there in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, the welcome table, and a typical kind of forum would be everybody start talking about something. They'd go around the table, whatever it was, then it would come to Jimmy and his answer would always be kind of a consummation of what everybody had said … I heard this from Wayne Shorter, who was explaining why he dug Miles so much. He said that Miles was listening to everybody play, and then when he came in, he would echo what everybody else said and then he would add his bit to it. And Jimmy had something like that, too. Maybe what he and Miles got out of being at each other was laying down a certain form.

See, Jimmy was more Socratic than Platonic, I think, because he would always try to understand what it is that was really being said, or what someone was really trying, the point they were trying to make.

Well, I made a little film. It was based on the story a guy told me, and I shot it sitting … The guy who told me this story was like a pimp, but he was sitting in the chair. It went on for forty-five minutes, the whole thing. That was my film. I managed to get it shown in Paris, and Jimmy saw it. He said to me, "Well, I must say I have just never seen our situation expressed that way." He was so funny, man.

MS: A question about how he was reading Cooper. I feel like when you read Cooper, he constructs a scene quite like Baldwin's novels, where the way the scenes are put together is almost sculptural or painterly.

CB: Well, I think the reason why that film [*If Beale Street Could Talk*, dir. Barry Jenkins, 2018] is so good, and the reason why the book is so good, is Jimmy was using his skills as a screenwriter to write a book, to write a novel because he'd had so much trouble. He had absolute … I don't see how anybody could survive the kind of Hollywood ignorance when he was writing the story of Malcolm X.[9]

He was writing the Malcolm X story here. He had an editor, given to him by the studio. His name was Perlman. And Perlman wasn't a racist guy; he was a well-meaning guy. But his idea of a film was so stupid. I used to go through and look at passages of what Jimmy would write and what Perlman would come in and change. When it was finished, it was not filmable, a complete disaster. So Jimmy, when he got out of that, he decided to write novels that could be made into really good films by changing his writing style. That's why that book was so effective, I think…

One of the things he wanted me to do was listen to him read it. He said, "Let me read to you." And so of course, I listened. It was the voice of the narrator who was a young woman. And it was brilliant. The whole story is told like Huckleberry Finn in the voice of that one person. The reason why I think he did it was because he knew if you were going to make a film from it, it had to be written in a way that would be possible to make a film from it because the Malcolm X story, as he had tried to attempt it, was an absolute failure.

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MS: I'm curious about a reference you made earlier, to Marshall McLuhan and narcissism. What does that mean for you?

CB: It's in the album called *The Lover's Question*, with this poetry of a misguided narrator. He says, "My watch and my compass, I think, are off." That's, again, Jimmy's humor and his satire. He was very good about writing about people who was supposed to be him, but were not him. I think that Columbus is the character who don't have the right map and who's got things kind of messed up, is in keeping with this whole idea of misguided, spoiled … He keeps referring to Norman's garden in that. And I wonder if that's a reference to Norman Mailer.

MS: It's the postmodern condition … to be unable to find yourself on the map.

CB: That's right. Hard to find yourself on the map. On our last visit [in 1987], the essay he read to me, "Freaks," was first called "Here Be Dragons," because the first map … This is also Columbus as a cartographer.[10] He had a map that pointed to the end of the Earth, and where it ended, he said, "And there be dragons," like once you fell off the flat Earth, you were just surrounded by dragons. Well, that's kind of prophetic, right? We are surrounded by dragons and monsters. For Jimmy, the monster was the person who couldn't love, who could only possess. In his essay on Norman Mailer, he kept warning Mailer of that, this kind of lovelessness. The music that Baldwin was into at that time was Michael Jackson's *Bad*. So when I left him in South of France [in 1987], the last thing I remember of Jimmy was, they were getting ready to turn on the video of "Bad." And the thing that really was pushing Jimmy, was the androgynous feeling that Michael Jackson represented.

Notes

1 Brown returned at several points in our conversations to Baldwin's work on the Malcolm X script, which he had undertaken in the late 1960s, prior to the two writers' first meeting. Baldwin's draft was later published in 1972 as *One Day When I Was Lost* (New York, Vintage, 2007). For accounts of Baldwin's screenwriting, see David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Arcade, 2015), pp. 291–301, and D. Quentin Miller, "Lost and … Found? James Baldwin's Script and Spike Lee's 'Malcolm X,'" *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), 671–85.

2 Brown grew up on a farm in Bolton, North Carolina, and received a scholarship to attend the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, starting in the fall of 1961, in the aftermath of the decisive sit-ins there in 1960. He tells the story of his early years up until college in *Coming Up Down Home: A Memoir of a Southern Childhood* (New York, Ecco, 1993). Baldwin knew the milieu of Brown's youth from his 1957 trip South, when he interviewed Black students involved in integrating the North Carolina school system, an experience described in the essays "A Fly in the Buttermilk" and "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South," first published in *Harper's* and the *Partisan Review* respectively, before being collected in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York, Dial Press, 1961).

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3 Baldwin's books through the period up to and including Brown's college years were *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), *Another Country* (1962), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

4 James Jones was an expatriate American novelist living in France; his novels about World War II, *From Here to Eternity* (1951) and *The Thin Red Line* (1962), were both adapted for Hollywood films.

5 Brown is here referring to Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York, Verso, 1999), which locates Wright against Baldwin from an explicitly Black feminist position. She writes: "Baldwin seemed wiser than Wright because he maintained a sense of the double reality of being black: the white man's vision of the black man and the man the black man had to be for himself. Baldwin had in mind a more humane manhood, a manhood that would take into account the expensive lesson the black man learned from oppression, a manhood that would perhaps turn even America's corrupting influence into something beneficial" (pp. 56–7).

6 He is referring to Baldwin's spoken-word album, *A Lover's Question*, recorded between September 1986 and September 1987, Label Bleu.

7 David Linx is a Belgian musician who collaborated with Baldwin on *A Lover's Question*.

8 In his memoir of his relationship with Pryor, *Pryor Lives! How Richard Pryor Became Richard Pryor or Kiss My Rich, Happy Black ... Ass!* (Scotts Valley, CA, CreateSpace, 2013), Brown indicates that he and Baldwin discussed Pryor during their first meeting in the early 1970s. Brown befriended Pryor in 1969, when the comedian moved to Berkeley and joined Cecil's circle of Black artists and activists, including Ishmael Reed and Huey P. Newton.

9 Brown first met Baldwin during the composition of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and both writers were working through their relationship to the prospect of filmmaking in the mid-1970s. He recalls the experience in a brief essay entitled "With James Baldwin at the Welcome Table," *The Common Reader* (September 23, 2019). Brown would later turn his own experience of Hollywood into a novel entitled *Days Without Weather* (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), which Baldwin would declare "allegorical."

10 Brown is referring here to the essay first published in *Playboy* in 1985 as "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," later collected as "Here Be Dragons," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 685–98. In that essay, Baldwin writes, "The Michael Jackson cacophony is fascinating in that it is not about Jackson at all. I hope he has the good sense to know it and the good fortune to snatch his life out of the jaws of a carnivorous success."

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