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"Protest Literature" or Race as a Social Construction: An Analysis of Baldwin's Blues for Mister Charlie

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Through the ages, art has tended to hold an important place in human society. It has been a source of amusement, expression, and social justice. One of the recurring questions regarding the significance of art is whether it ought to exist for its own sake, or whether it ought to be used in order to incite political and societal change. This issue was addressed frequently by artists during the Harlem Renaissance, who found themselves on differing sides of the debate, and it is one that has been framed by slave narratives and literature that would be produced later by people of African descent. To many artist-activists, the latter idea of using art to incite change is of utmost importance. For those who wrote and created during the push for civil rights, expressing a sense of purpose through art was a way to process social circumstances and events in order to change and improve those circumstances. During the height of the Civil Rights Movement, in the 1950s and 1960s, many African American writers and activists put a great deal of artistic energy toward ushering American society into a more racially equal, accepting future. This was done by authors in the form of protest literature and was perhaps catalyzed by modes of oppression such as the anti-miscegenation sentiment and racial prejudice within the American justice system. Protest literature, here, can be understood simply as "literature that self-consciously aspires to change the world" (Saul 404). It examines problematic aspects of society and seeks to raise awareness in an attempt to ultimately incite remedy.

This tradition of protest serves as an undercurrent in certain literature that emerged during the time period—such as James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Although Baldwin is not traditionally seen as one who produces literature in this vein, his work can be read this way considering the above definition. In particular, *Blues for Mister Charlie* can be read as functioning as a statement about the manner in which problematic ideas surrounding race can contribute to a lack of social justice and understanding. Baldwin wrote his play during a racially tumultuous social and political climate in the United States. Originally published in 1964 during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, it echoes issues that emerged during the Emmett Till trial of 1955, which was arguably a catalyst to the movement itself (Tyson 2). As such, the play functions as a form of protest literature that works to portray complex, prejudicial racial relations between blacks and whites, showing through characterization that race is not something fundamentally genetic or biological, but rather, a social construction. Furthermore, Baldwin argues that the inherently flawed construction of race can be transcended in order to promote solidarity in a fight for equality. This notion remains relevant, even in the present day.

Before discussing the ways in which *Blues for Mister Charlie* functions as a form of protest literature as it relates to what it reveals about race and its function, it is important to first offer the ways in which race will be addressed since its definition varies by discipline. In his article, "Race and Revisabililty," Richard A. Jones, a philosopher based at Howard University in Washington, D.C., captures the subjectivity of race in a single paragraph. He writes:

> …a word might have different meanings from different subjective perspectives. From a trained human geneticist's view, race might be understood in terms of phenotypes and genotypes. From a sociologist's vantage, race may be seen as an aspect of how societies are organized. Anthropologists may interpret race in

> cultural forms of life. Whereas from a political scientist's standpoint, race may be viewed in terms of hierarchical dominance-subordination relations, political philosophers interested in race in its definitive (theory) and social (practice) structures may share many of these perspectives but go further than these merely descriptive qualities to the normativity of race, that is, what race ought to be. The important point is that intentional definitions are highly disjunctive. (616)

From this insight alone, it seems immediately evident that defining race is no simple task, and that perceptions of what "race" means are ~~is~~ heavily influenced by the background of anyone attempting to define it. Biologists, for example, might focus on anatomical and genetic characteristics that distinguish people, whereas sociologists would see those very features as contributing to the social construction of race due to the meaning assigned them. The *Norton Anthology Introduction to Literature* brings these perspectives on race together in a section about constructivism, highlighting the idea that

> differences of…skin color…have great impact on how one is classified, brought up, and treated socially, and on one's subjectivity or conception of identity…These differences, however, are more constructed by ideology and the resulting behaviors than by any natural programming. (1986)

In this argument, then, I will be approaching the concept of race through a sociological lens that acknowledges the ways it has been imagined in order to propagate long-standing oppressor/oppressed power dynamics in the American South.

As a final note before exploring the ways in which the play functions as protest literature that shows the ways in which the concept of race is a social construction, it is crucial to recognize that Baldwin is fairly disdainful of the genre of protest literature. This disdain,

however, does not hinder him from responding with a keen awareness to the social and political climate of his times. Patrick Chura speaks to the historical context of Baldwin's play in ways that connect with Baldwin's purpose for writing. In his article, "Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmett Till and the Historicity of *To Kill A Mockingbird*," Chura discusses, for a moment, the complex race relations present in the American South. He writes that they were "dominated by the *Brown* decision, which negated the doctrine of 'separate but equal' that had since *Plessy v. Ferguson* been the basis of the South's segregated way of life" (2). Evidently, the legal desegregation of the South did not do a great deal in the way of social equality for blacks. It was only a small step, which was reflected in the lingering racist attitudes of many individuals. Chura goes on to say that there was a fear that "mixing of any kind could result in the suggestion of social equality" (2). This is the fear around which anti-miscegenation sentiment revolved. A white southerner procreating with somebody of African descent was seen as something that could pollute a purely "white" bloodline—something that might create cracks in racial solidarity (Brattain 623). In fact, the "social equality" suggested by Chura was even seen, frequently by leaders of White Citizens Councils, as something "un-American, the goal of both the integrationists and the communists" (Brattain 623). Regardless of the association, racial mixing—especially in the context of miscegenation—was rooted in a fear of black sexuality, and in the idea that interracial relations would somehow pollute a pure race. The rampant fear of black sexuality in white society during the time period in which Baldwin was writing made itself extremely evident in the form of anti-miscegenation laws and racially prejudiced sentiment on nearly every level of society, including one law, by the 1950s, that punished interracial sex with up to "five years in prison with or without hard labor" (Brattain 623). Chura highlights even President Eisenhower's defense of segregationists by quoting his statement, "[They] are not bad people. All they are concerned

about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit in schools alongside some big overgrown negroes" (4). This highlights the stereotype of the "black rapist," which Baldwin works diligently in *Blues for Mister Charlie* to shatter.

The main character of the play, Richard Henry, is a young African American man who has recently spent time outside his segregated town in the American South, enjoying the relative social freedom that life in the northern city of New York allows him. When describing the less-oppressive atmosphere of the North, Baldwin highlights, in particular, the sexual freedom Richard is able to experience. Liberated—at least marginally—from the heavy anti-miscegenation sentiment prevalent in the south, Richard speaks in-depth about the interracial sexual relationships he experiences in New York. When he asks Pete, a fellow young African American, if he remembers a woman Richard has previously told him about, Richard expounds:

> She's *white*, man. I got a whole *gang* of white chicks in New York. That's *right*. And they can't get enough of what little Richard's got—and I give it to them, too, baby, believe me. You say black people ain't got no dignity? Man, you ought to watch a white woman when she wants you to give her a little bit. They will do anything, baby, *any*thing! Wait—I got some pictures. That's the one lives in the Village. *Ain't* she fine? I'd hate to tell you where I've had that long yellow hair. And, dig this one, this is Sandy… (26)

It is bold of Richard to be discussing his sexual endeavors with white women so openly with Pete, especially considering their location. These words are uttered in Papa D.'s Juke Joint, a local venue frequented by the townspeople. Mentioning his interactions *and* having physical proof of them in the form of photographs is something that could easily get him in trouble in a place where there are strong feelings in opposition to interracial sex. By describing his sexual

experiences in this way, one might initially think that Baldwin is crafting Richard in a manner that fits the "hypersexual black male" trope feared by many racist white people. This feeling could be magnified throughout the play, as Richard continues to show people the photographs he has of his white girlfriends in the North. Baldwin does not stop at Richard when exploring sexuality as it pertains to race, though. He also addresses this idea of miscegenation through the characterization of Lyle Britten.

Lyle is a white man, who is suspected of committing the murder of Richard. Interestingly enough, during Lyle's trial, Richard is accused of having raped Lyle's wife, Jo, which is what allegedly results in the murder in the first place—although, until the very end, Lyle denies his guilt in the horrible crime at all (120). Baldwin, again, is highlighting the stereotypical notion of the "black rapist," which was a part of racist ideation during the time period. However, Baldwin turns this notion on its head by the way he characterizes Lyle. In particular, he paints Lyle as a character that is sexually despicable, a true rapist, and one who engages in interracial sexual relations. On page 67 of the play, Lyle and Parnell are conversing about an affair that has taken place between Lyle and a young black woman named Willa Mae. As if boasting, he says that, the first time he "took" Willa Mae, he "had to fight her." He goes on to say that she must have been frightened, which is why he had to fight her in order to have sex with her, and then he tells Parnell, "She liked it as much as me" (68). While it would be difficult to glean whether or not Willa Mae actually ended up enjoying a sexual relationship with Lyle, it may be more well-founded to assume that she stopped fighting him due to the intimidating racial and gendered power dynamics at play. How could a black woman possibly say "no" to a white man in such a situation without fear of repercussion, given that the plot time for this play is circa the mid-1950s?

Willa Mae is not Lyle's only African American conquest, though. In a flashback at the end of the play to another conversation between him and Parnell, Lyle remembers a time in which he was getting ready to ask his wife to marry him. While thinking of all the lovely things he appreciates about Jo—one being that she could mother his children, and another being that she is "clean"—he also emphasizes that she is "the only *white* virgin" in town. He goes on further to testify, "I can vouch for the fact ain't many black [virgins]" (108). Here, it is evident that Lyle has made a habit of having sexual relations with black women. It is difficult to determine based on textual evidence what proportion of these sexual relationships were consensual, and what proportion involved sexual assault and/or rape. However, these passages show that Lyle—only marginally similar to Richard in terms of miscegenation—possesses the quality of reckless hypersexuality, compounded by complicated racial power dynamics, which many mid-century racists would have considered to be exclusive to the black race.

What is equally noteworthy is the fact that Lyle instigates and participates in these affairs even after declaring his strong feelings against interracial sexual mixing. Early in the play, again in a conversation with Parnell, he emphatically states:

> You sound like you think I got something against colored folks—but I don't. I never have, not in all my life. But I'll be damned if I'll mix with them. That's all. I don't believe in it, and that's *all*. I don't want no big buck nigger lying up next to Josephine and that's where all this will lead to and you know it as well as I do! (14)

Even though Lyle seems adamantly against racial mixing, and even though this passage makes evident a distinctive fear that "big buck" black males will begin to breed with white women in a way that, based on information put forth earlier in this paper, could "pollute" a purely white race,

Lyle sleeps with black women. His adamant viewpoint opposed to miscegenation is blatantly hypocritical and completely contradictory to the way in which he carries out his own life.

This sexual parallel between Lyle and Richard is important in portraying race as a social construction. The idea that both men participate in interracial love affairs—as well as the fact that Lyle is actually the character that evidently rapes black women—shatter the "black rapist" trope, showing that toxic or hypersexuality is nonexclusive to either race. This aspect of Baldwin's argument is compelling. However, rather than leaving it at a discussion of sexuality, he goes deeper, to explore both Lyle and Richard as round characters. In the aforementioned conversation between Parnell and Lyle, there is something noteworthy: It creates another parallel between Lyle and Richard. Lyle, here, heavily implies his dislike for the black race, which is clearly evident in the racist undertones of his speech. For instance, Lyle thinks it is outrageous for the town to raise "so much fuss about a nigger—and a northern nigger at that" (13). When Parnell attempts to verbally defend Richard, Lyle asks, "Has niggers suddenly got to be *holy* in this town?" (14). The implication here is that African Americans are somehow undeserving of the "fuss" and concern that arises when one is murdered.

Richard mirrors a similar hateful sentiment when he embarks on a tirade concerning his generalized dislike for white people. Not only is he understandably angry at how he and his loved ones have suffered at the hands of white people, though. In his heated comments, Richard also calls upon poignant memories that are, by nature, constructions of the past. In this case, even his memory allows him to comment on race as a construction. Furthermore, Richard's tirade calls upon a history of racial abuse and both collective and personal trauma, which is relevant when thinking of what may be the catalysts to protest literature. Although there is a strong degree of anger in Richard's reconstructed memories, Baldwin offers this anger with context,

denying its being coded as "proof" of innate, violent tendencies in people of African descent. For one thing, it is assumed that his mother suffers an untimely death by being pushed down a flight of stairs by some white men in the hotel where she worked (21). Perhaps his mother's death is a catalyst in his complex and rightfully hateful mindset. His grandmother, Mother Henry, implores him to avoid living his life with such a strong degree of loathing toward white people. However, he presents a variety of reasons that make a compelling argument in his case. He says, "I am going to treat every one of them as though they were responsible for all the crimes that ever happened in the history of the world … They're responsible for all the misery *I've* ever seen, and that's good enough for me" (21). When his grandmother suggests that such spite could cause him to become ill, Richard counters that his hatred will make him well. He commits himself to remembering the injustices suffered by people of his own race at the hands of their oppressors, which seems to be a gesture of solidarity with other people of his race, including his family members. He proclaims:

> I'm going to remember Mama, and Daddy's face [the day Mama died], and Aunt Edna…and all those boys and girls in Harlem and all them pimps and whores and gangsters and all them cops. And I'm going to remember all the dope that's flowed through my veins. I'm going to remember everything—the jails I been in and the cops that beat me and how long a time I spent screaming and stinking in my own dirt, trying to break my habit. (21)

Here, it is evident that Richard's dislike for white people is strong. He and his loved ones have been personally affected by the attitudes and actions of racist whites, which Richard seems to suggest is what results in some of the troublesomeness described in the quoted text. Furthermore, this passage shows how Richard's own remembered constructions of what it means to be "black"

or "white" have been propagated by the power dynamics of racial oppression. The sort of filth and horror that Richard remembers, for instance, are inherently charged with memories of experiences such as the ones Lyle inflicts on African Americans based on his own prejudices and racist attitudes—rape, lynching, and the like.

The way that Richard and Lyle mirror each other with both sexual experiences and an intensely charged dislike for the other race—especially in terms of how they use their memories and experiences to construct their sentiments and thoughts about race—is significant, because it almost constructs the characters in a way that seems racially ambiguous through their relatively shared experiences and sentiments. This goes right back to the idea of Baldwin portraying race as a social construction in *Blues for Mister Charlie*, as he suggests that neither of these things are exclusive to either race. These character portrayals are significant for another reason, though: By allowing each character to have depth of thought and feeling on top of a robust sexuality, Baldwin gives them both the full humanity they deserve. He does not dehumanize either his black or white characters in an effort to edify a particular group, but rather shows the complexities that exist in all his major characters in a way that illuminates a racial problem without coming across as overtly propagandistic. This is something that was important to Baldwin, especially when considering his work as a form of protest literature.

The premise behind protest literature is that it takes a stand against some sort of ideological system that is a source of oppression. Scott Saul discusses the genre of protest literature in his article, "Protest Lit 101." The general premise is that there is a relationship between social progress and creativity, and that art of this genre is inherently political. Furthermore, if a work of protest is doing its job effectively, it "should welcome rather than shy away from the complicated questions of intention and reception" (405). Furthermore, Saul argues

that protest art is not merely a genre that serves as a "radical-messaging system" for a social movement. It does not simply "inspire, exhort, instruct, dramatize movement goals, or tell the history of the movement." Rather, if it is done right, it has a critical role in recognizing the limits of the movement, critiquing *and* transcending ideology, and removing itself from a tendency to "drift into dogmatism." Ideally, it should show the full complexity of human life as pertaining to a certain struggle or movement. Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* is an example of the genre in its most masterful form.

In the case of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin effectively conveys the complexity of human relations and portrays a truthful depth of character. The most significant result of this seems to be the strong argument made in favor of race being nothing more than a social construction. By humanizing both his black *and* white characters and showing the complex ways in which they interact with each other, he shows that certain stereotypes with racial connotations—such as hypersexuality in black males and the idea that white people are inherently an enemy to blacks—are *not* linked to the color of one's skin. The fact that he can turn such ideas on their heads so easily points to race being socially constructed. The illumination of the precariousness of race makes clear the travesty of violent and oppressive measures inflicted upon others due to race, especially when considering Emmett Till's murder.

Baldwin had concerns about the genre of protest literature, especially regarding the ways in which the genre can fall short if an author is not careful. In his essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," which appears in the collection, *Notes of a Native Son*, he makes a case for the shortcomings of one of the original protest novels in its push for racial equality. Concerning *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he asserts that the book oversimplifies very complicated human experiences (14). He argues that the characters have very little to no depth and that—in shying away from the

truth—Stowe's book is not doing a great deal of good for its intended purpose. Baldwin argues that the novelist has a responsibility to portray humans in all their complexity, a responsibility to stare unflinchingly at the truth of human nature and write about it honestly (14-15).

Even though he had unfavorable opinions about the shortcomings of protest literature, he was able to execute the genre in such a way that it had a great impact. There are a few passages from *Notes of a Native Son* that indicate that—despite his reservations about protest literature—he was still very much interested in using his writing to show the problems with perceptions of race in human society. For instance, he talks in the Preface to the 1984 edition of the collection of essays about the idea that black people have historically been dehumanized, both in literature and society. He writes, "It is savagely, if one may say so, ironical that the only proof the world—mankind—has ever had of White supremacy is in the Back face and voice: that face never scrutinized, that voice never heard" (xxii). He understands that it is necessary to go beyond tropes when writing racially, and in a great deal of his literature he humanizes those who have been marginalized for such a great deal of history. However, like a master of what is arguably his own protest literature, he does not dehumanize the white characters in his work in order to bolster the humanity of the black ones. In his introduction to Baldwin's collection of essays, Edward P. Jones writes that Baldwin "was in the minority of all the black writers…who understood the importance of giving white people their due as full-fledged human beings" (xi). He goes on to emphasize what Baldwin seemed to convey throughout his body of work: that white characters do not have to be dehumanized in order to humanize black ones. This is exactly what Baldwin does in giving both Richard and Lyle depth, which bolsters his argument in favor of race being perceived as a social construction.

Richard, for instance, is given depth, roundness and, ultimately, the humanity that is due to him, by being portrayed not only this sexual being—which transcends racial designations and applies broadly to young people—but also a person who grapples with complex feelings surrounding the ways in which he has observed oppression at the hands of whites in his life. In portraying Richard with complex thoughts and feelings on top of his robust sexuality, Baldwin is allowing him to exist as a character that is fully human. In this way, Baldwin fulfills his own idea, suggested in "Everybody's Protest Novel," of what a novelist has a responsibility to do—to portray humans in complex ways, to stare at the truth of human nature and talk about it in an honest manner (14-15).

Lyle's character is further deepened with explorations of how he experiences systematic oppression in society. For instance, it is established that, despite being white, Lyle is also poor. Çigdem Üsekes write that Lyle "may earn some sympathy simply because…he is poor and uneducated and is, in some senses, a victim of the system not unlike his black victims" (16). Indeed, Lyle is of a low socioeconomic status, and—according to Parnell—"The poor whites have been just as victimized in this part of the world as the blacks have ever been" (41). This is yet another instance of Baldwin drawing a comparison between Lyle and Richard, and, furthermore, there is an implication in this statement that societal power dynamics surrounding oppression have to do with more than simply the color of a person's skin. Because of this, there is a degree of ambiguity surrounding Lyle's character. He is blatantly racist, which is despicable, but at the same time, Baldwin crafts his character in such a way that could potentially elicit sympathy from the audience, as readers seek to understand the oppression of economic poverty.

In the same way that Lyle is presented in a manner that could potentially garner sympathy, Richard's character has a degree of ambiguity. The reader can easily sympathize with him as an innocent black man lynched at the hands of a racist white man, but certain aspects of his personality—such as, perhaps, the way he boasts about his sexuality, or his nearly militant dislike of the white race—work to elicit a more complicated response from the reader. Saul touches on this ambiguity in his article about protest literature. He writes, "If ambiguity and conflict represent the best case scenario for protest literature, then we should be wary of any artist who claims to speak, unambiguously and with an easy conscience, as the voice of a movement" (405), and he goes on to argue, "The most powerful forms of protest art often work by leaving contradictions unresolved and questions unanswered" (407). Essentially, the best protest literature provides a sense of ambiguity that allows the reader to see the inherent contradictions in logic and perspective. It welcomes questioning and aims to provide a comprehensive view of the issue at hand. Baldwin does an excellent job of this, which is one of the things that makes *Blues for Mister Charlie* such a powerful form of protest literature. Baldwin may have had a distasteful attitude toward the genre in general, but he evidently made up for it in his own work. The play aims to transform the way the reader sees the patterns of racial oppression at play in the real world, which is another notable characteristic of this genre (Saul 417).

Regardless of both Richard and Lyle being presented in somewhat morally ambiguous manners, though, Baldwin makes sure to emphasize the idea that—in the particular case of racial oppression—there is a double standard at play, which is what ensures that, in the end, the reader ultimately sympathizes with Richard and learns something about the impact of race as a construction. Of course, this seems like the obvious choice, but Baldwin makes note that, even

though Lyle deserves some degree of understanding for the ways in which he, too, suffers, he does not deserve extended sympathy. In the case of the interracial sexual relations in which both characters engage, and which seems to be the issue at the center of the play, Richard makes an important comment: "[White men] can rape and kill our women and we can't do nothing. But if we touch one of their dried-up, pale-assed women, we get our nuts cut off" (25). This comment is in reference to Lyle being known for previously murdering the husband of Willa Mae, whom he has raped at least once. There was no justice for the murder of Old Bill, but Baldwin notes through the voice of Richard that, if the racial roles in the situation would have been reversed, there would not have been tolerance for it.

The complex way in which Baldwin portrays both Richard and Lyle speaks to the play being a form of protest literature that highlights double standards surrounding race and speaks up against them. However, Baldwin does something else through these characters, too. By crafting them in such a way that they both parallel and mirror each other, he seems to be emphasizing again and again that race—at least in terms of the negative connotations and stereotypes that often accompanied ideas of it during the time period in which the play was written—is socially constructed. Both characters, for instance, seem to be hypersexual. Richard boasts about his sexual relations with white women in the North, while Lyle boasts about his sexual conquests of black women in the South. They both engage in interracial mixing, while simultaneously expressing strong hatred for the other race. This suggests that the quality of hypersexuality, commonly associated with the "black rapist" trope, is not exclusive to race. By portraying Lyle as equally sexual—and furthermore, as an actual rapist, while the text suggests nothing about Richard's escapades being nonconsensual—Baldwin highlights the discrepancy between an idea associated with African Americans by racist whites and a more honest portrayal of the relational

dynamics. The idea of the "black rapist," then, and therefore a specific idea of what it means to be black or white, is socially constructed by those who wish to maintain certain power dynamics.

In the play, Parnell is one of the characters who comments on these racial power dynamics, which is interesting considering his status as a newspaper reporter. During the Civil Rights Movement, the press was instrumental in fostering social progress. According to Chura, it became "a catalyst in the growth of the civil rights movement, and one of its major roles became that of a defender and chronicler of injustice, clearly taking the side of social progress and arguing powerfully in the case of the oppressed" (11). This began with the trial for the murder of Emmett Till, on which *Blues for Mister Charlie* is notably based, in which a young man was brutally lynched by two white men after he allegedly whistled at a white woman in 1955 (2). In the Till trial, as well as in Baldwin's play, there is no justice for the murder victims due to the long-standing oppressor/oppressed relationship between racist white Americans and subjugated black Americans. The press, then—and in this case, Parnell—is an important force for instigating change and highlighting societal issues.

Baldwin uses the mouth of Parnell to make a great deal of commentary on the nature of race being socially constructed, as well as the way racial power dynamics exist in society. For instance, in a conversation between Reverend Meridian Henry (Richard's father) and Parnell, the two men discuss said power dynamics. At the loss of his son, Meridian is growing angry at injustice and suggests that violence may soon be necessary to fight for racial equality (38). Parnell, who is somewhat of a peaceful mediator between the races, is appalled by this suggestion and reminds Meridian, "You said your race was the human race" (39). This comment alone seems to imply that racial qualifiers established to the "the human race" are man-made, and that the notions of blackness and whiteness, then, are inherently constructed. However, even

though Baldwin *is* ultimately suggesting this, he still reiterates the importance of acknowledging the power dynamics in place in order to rise above them. Only a little ways farther down the page, Parnell acknowledges the privileges his whiteness allows him. When Meridian accuses Parnell of perhaps not existing authentically on the side of social justice, when he tells Parnell that he has something in common with the Police Chief due to their whiteness, Parnell notes: "I *do* know the Chief of Police better than you—because I'm white. And I can make him listen to me—because I'm white" (39). Meridian, on the other hand, has less leverage with him, because he is not white. In an additional remark made by Parnell during this particular conversation with Meridian in an effort to diffuse the tension between them, he says, "We have come too far together, there is too much at stake, for you to become black now, for me to become white" (40). By suggesting in this comment that "black" or "white" is an identity marker that one can "become," Baldwin is further arguing that race is a social construction.

The fear of miscegenation is central to the play and has been discussed at length, but it can be generalized to an overarching fear of interracial mixing. Parnell—a reporter, a member of the press, which is thought to be instrumental in instigating social change—is another example of the manner in which mixing manifests. In some ways, he fits in with those with whom he interacts, but in other ways, he seems to stand apart. In the aforementioned conversation between him and Meridian, even though the two of them are friends who seem to be relatively sympathetic with each other, there is a disconnection when Meridian highlights Parnell's whiteness (39). Similarly, in a scene that occurs later in the play between Parnell and Lyle's white friends, there is a discrepancy. At the beginning of Act Two, Parnell enters the Britten home on the morning of Richard's funeral. He gives cheerful greetings to the variety of white people present, and he is warmly welcomed by Lyle's wife, Jo, as she offers him a cup of coffee

(51). As the people present chat and joke with Parnell about small goings-on in his life, things seem to be going well, and Parnell seems to fit in with their socially constructed white life. However, the conversation soon turns to the upcoming trial and the murder of Richard. Parnell, of course, has views that are not in line with those of many of the other, racist whites in town. A man named Ellis tells Parnell, "A lot of people in this town, Parnell, would like to know exactly where you stand…" (52). Knowing Parnell is rather liberal, they accuse him of "irresponsibility" and warn him that it will no longer be tolerated by them.

This is when Parnell speaks up. Highlighting the atrocities suffered by black Americans at the hands of whites, he asks, "What *are* you going to do? Dip me in tar and feathers? Boil me in oil? Castrate me? Burn me? Cover yourselves in white sheets and come and burn crosses in front of my house?" (53). This language is clearly saturated with images of lynching. In asking the white citizens present if they are to treat him in such a manner, he seems to be identifying more strongly with his black friends and allies. The price he pays: a woman named Susan accuses him of being "*worse* than a nigger" (53). This is very similar to the racial disconnection that is evident in the conversation between Parnell and Meridian. Although the reader knows that Parnell's skin is white, his ability to transcend racial separation and sympathize with both races at different times paints him in a way that seems almost racially ambiguous. At any rate, Baldwin seems to be suggesting that there is potential for understanding, connection, and mixing for people with different skin colors.

To bring the discussion back to the idea of interracial romantic and sexual relations, Parnell plays a role here, too, which works against the fear of such mixing that existed during the time period in which *Blues for Mister Charlie* was written. Unlike Richard and Lyle, whose interracial sexual relations are arguably charged with spite for the other race—going so far as to

result in Lyle actually raping at least one black woman—Parnell's romantic relationship with a black woman is deeply loving and authentic. Parnell describes the relationship to Lyle's wife, Jo:

> I used to look at her, the way she moved, so beautiful and free…and I wondered what she thought of me…Nothing happened. We got so we told each other everything…Nobody in the world knew about her *inside*, what she was like, and how she dreamed, but me. And nobody in the world knew about *me* inside, what I wanted, and how I dreamed, but her. (64)

When the two are caught kissing by the girl's mother, she is taken away, and they do not end up seeing each other again. However, Parnell's love for her remains. "If I found her again," Parnell says, "I'd marry her. I'd give her the children I've always wanted to have" (65). The notion of interracial marriage and therefore sexual relations here is radical during a time period in which there was such a drastic fear of "polluting" a white racial lineage with black blood. Perhaps this is one of the ways in which Baldwin protests this fear, in which he argues that there is a possibility of transcending racial boundaries that are constructed in order to maintain racial power dynamics in society. Throughout the text, Parnell comes across in a way that argues for peace and attention to humanity above racial differences. Baldwin crafts his character to seem racially ambiguous at times, which is a way that also supports the idea of race being a social construction. This is evident to the very end of the play, when Parnell ultimately commits to being a part of the fight for civil rights (121), which is all the more relevant when thinking of his role as a reporter.

As has been previously mentioned, reporters and other members of the press played a significant role in catalyzing the Civil Rights Movement. It was the press that became "defender and chronicler of injustice" (Chura 11), which is interesting when considering Emmett Till.

There are striking similarities between the real-life case of Emmett Till and the situation with Richard in *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Till, a fourteen-year-old Chicagoan boy, was killed brutally at the hands of two white men on August 28, 1955, for "allegedly whistling at a white woman in a store in Money, Mississippi" (Chura 2). In an article entitled "Emmett Till in African American Literature," Christopher Metress comments on the importance of the press in exposing the absolute atrocity of the situation. For one thing, when Till's murderers were allowed to walk free despite staggering evidence against them, African American newspapers all over the country "shouted out in protest" against the decision (88). One particular newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, published a memoir by a man named Charles Diggs, which proclaimed that, though the trial was over, African Americans should "never forget its meaning" (88). The article published in the paper elicited strong reactions from readers and served as a sort of call to action. One reader of the *Courier* said, as quoted by Metress:

> Poor little Emmett Till was just another Negro—but above all he was a human being. We cannot return Emmett Till to the arms of his mother, but we can surely see that there will never be a repetition of this unforgivable crime. Don't let that fourteen-year-old boy's life be lost for nothing. Demand and get a retrial for the two who are responsible for his death. (88)

In another impactful publication called *Look* magazine, journalist William Bradford Huie paid Till's murderers $4000 to tell their "shocking story." According to Metress, the men were "protected by laws against double jeopardy and the absence of far-reaching federal civil rights legislation" (88), so they spoke in extensive, explicit detail about Till's kidnapping, brutal treatment, and death—in details that are far too horrible and gruesome for the purposes of this paper. Whether the article in *Look* was intended to expose one of mid-century society's great

tragedies in order to illuminate injustice, or whether Huie wrote the article simply to sensationalize the atrocity, the bottom line is that it gave Till visibility in a way that has impacted a variety of African American writers since then. This is one of the ways in which the press played an instrumental role in the Civil Rights Movement.

In *Blues for Mister Charlie*, something similar is evident, and it comes through in Parnell's characterization. Baldwin says himself in his preface to the play, "Notes for Blues," that the play takes inspiration from the circumstances surrounding Emmett Till (xiv). In the same way, there are, perhaps, similarities in how Parnell plays a role in the situation as a reporter. In the scene in which Parnell is with the people of Whitetown the morning of Richard's funeral, Parnell comments that, if people would like to know his political and social opinions—already implied to be rather progressive—they should read the newspaper he publishes. To this, a woman named Lillian replies, "I wouldn't filthy my hands with that Communist sheet!" (52). This comment solidifies the suspicion that Parnell tends toward liberalism, and it carries an implication that, perhaps, Parnell is vocal about his stance on political and social issues in his newspaper.

If he is, indeed, vocal about his progressive opinions, then, this gives more weight to the scene at the very end of the play, in which Parnell completely renounces his friendship with Lyle. Parnell emphasizes that he "knew that [Jo] was lying and that [Lyle] had made her lie" (117). This seems to be the catalyst to Parnell ultimately dissociating from his existence in Whitetown and ultimately desiring to charge forward in the push for civil rights for African Americans. On the very last page of the play, Parnell asks Juanita—one of the black characters—"Can I join you on the march?...Can I walk with you?" To which she replies, "Well, we can walk in the same direction, Parnell" (121). In this situation, his decision to join the march for civil

rights could be beneficial for the movement as a whole considering his role as a reporter. By having the means to publish written work and also by walking on the side of progression and equality, he is creating circumstances that could allow for widespread effects. Furthermore, although the reader does not know what happens to the characters after these final words of the play are uttered, one might wonder if Parnell could go on to illuminate the horror of the injustice he has just witnessed, similar to articles published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Look* magazine in real life after the murder of Emmett Till. Similarly to the ways memory is shown earlier in the play to be a way of reconstructing racialized experiences, too, Parnell, as a reporter, may be able to reconstruct racial events and travesties in writing in order to bring about change.

This last scene is noteworthy for another reason, which seems to provide an insight that links the arguments of this paper: The moment after Parnell renounces his friendship with Lyle, Lyle exclaims, "What's the matter with you? Have you forgotten you a white man? A white man!...I'm ashamed of you. Ashamed of you! Get on over to niggertown!" (117). By implying that Parnell's progressive viewpoint may as well make him black, Baldwin is emphasizing again the way that race is a social construction. Although Parnell's skin is white, he is ostracized in this last scene by his fellow white people as he decides to act in a way that is contradictory to the racist ways of many of them. By deciding to join the push for civil rights with his African American allies, he is essentially treated as a black person by Lyle. This is a point that Baldwin has made time and again throughout the play in different ways, and he executes it masterfully. This is a play that functions as a form of protest fiction, which shatters problematic stereotypes and iterates that the racial treatment people experience based on skin color is heavily influenced by complicated power dynamics in society.

Through his characterization of Richard, Lyle, and Parnell, James Baldwin effectively argues in his play *Blues for Mister Charlie* that race—separate from how the word applies to the color of one's skin—is a social construction. He creates his characters in a manner that gives them depth and ambiguity, such as in making Lyle and Richard live parallel experiences in some regard, and as with Parnell's inherent ability to transcend racial boundaries and serve an important role as a reporter. The play functions as a form of protest literature inspired by the situation involving Emmett Till in 1955, which Baldwin writes thoroughly in a way that gives each character the chance to be fully human in an effort to explain the multiple facets and perspectives of the complex racial relations and prejudices that existed during the time period in which he was writing. During a time in which there was a rampant fear of black sexuality and miscegenation—evident in the tragic circumstances of Emmett Till's murder—this play was revolutionary and continues to be an important piece of literature that works to highlight societal inequities and promote racial transcendence and understanding.

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