Music All Up and Down the Street

Listening to Childhood in James Baldwin’s Little Man, Little Man†

ABSTRACT This article takes James Baldwin’s only children’s book, Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood, as a starting point to explore his theorizations of music, affect, and childhood. Based loosely on the lives of his nephew and niece as well as his own memories of childhood, the book follows children protagonists and friends TJ, WT, and Blinky as they play in the streets of 1970s Harlem. They jump rope, play ball, interact with their adult neighbors, and witness the effects of police surveillance and drug abuse on their community. Baldwin argues that, through these experiences, Black children grow up with the myth of American innocence quickly dispelled and are thus not naïve to the past and present of the United States’ structural racism. Music is integral to Baldwin’s exploration of the affective contours of Black childhood. When community is threatened by white supremacy, music repeatedly enters the story to repair communal ties. To Baldwin, Black-identified musics (especially jazz and the blues) are essential to experiencing joy amid hardship and pain, and he uses the blues to communicate a metaphysics of blackness. Combining archival sources, literary analysis, affect theory, and Black studies, this article listens to the joys, fears, hopes, and pains of Black childhood that Baldwin renders audible. It complicates white notions of childhood innocence and shows music’s importance in experiencing joy and sustaining struggle.

KEYWORDS: childhood, race, racism, affect theory, innocence, James Baldwin, music

“Music all up and down the street, TJ runs it every day.”† So begins Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood, the only children’s book written by American novelist and essayist James Baldwin. Originally published in 1976, the book quickly went out of print and received only scant attention in the press. In its single major review, written for the New York Times Book Review by African American children’s author Julius Lester, it was given a lukewarm reception, with Lester finding it neither “exceptionally exciting [n]or

†Editor’s Note: This article received the David Sanjek Graduate Student Paper Prize at the 2019 IASPM-US conference. Members of the judging committee wrote, “DeCoste’s paper was nuanced, compelling, and well-researched. Combining archival work and oral history, DeCoste analyzes how music acts as a through line within James Baldwin’s children’s book Little Man, Little Man, connecting the community and the characters across generations. In so doing, he deploys literary criticism, historical analysis, and musical knowledge to open up new ways of thinking about Baldwin’s work and personal philosophy.”


disappointing. Lester’s critique perhaps stemmed from the ambiguous audience for the book. Promotional cards advertised it as a “child’s book for adults,” but the layout was more typical of a children’s book; watercolor images by white French artist Yoran Cazac took up much of the space on the page and the word count fell short of most books meant for adults. Through Little Man, Little Man, we get a glimpse of how James Baldwin theorized childhood based on his own experiences growing up in Harlem. Music was critical to Baldwin’s portrayal of childhood, and he sprinkled it throughout the book, using it to bring joy to the text.

Despite its fade into obscurity, Little Man, Little Man has recently come back into the public eye after being edited and re-published on Duke University Press in 2018. Little Man, Little Man’s new edition features an introduction by editors Nicholas Boggs and Jennifer DeVere Brody with a foreword and afterword by Baldwin’s nephew, Tejan Karefa-Smart, and niece, Aisha Karefa-Smart, on whom the book is in part based. When Tejan and Aisha were kids, Tejan asked his uncle Jimmy when he was going to write a book about him and, a few years later, a box of children’s books from Dial Press arrived on their doorstep. Tejan and Aisha provide the inspiration for four-year-old TJ and eight-year-old Blinky who, along with their seven-year-old friend WT, navigate the streets of their Harlem neighborhood, jumping rope and playing ball while also witnessing the effects of police surveillance and substance abuse on their community.

There are two main adult protagonists in the book. Mr. Man is a thirty-six-year-old janitor who lives downstairs in the same building as the children and whose record player sounds out into the streets where they play. Mr. Man’s wife, Miss Lee, is a friend to the children who struggles with alcoholism. For much of the work, the children run errands for their neighbors including an older woman named Miss Beanpole, who spends her days staring out the window. The story builds up to a final scene in which Miss Lee, in a drunken stupor, accidentally drops a bottle off the roof. It crashes to the ground, covering TJ’s head with tiny shards of glass. As WT runs over to check on TJ, he steps in the glass and cuts his foot through a hole in his shoe and begins bleeding profusely. The children run and get Mr. Man. In the final scene, which I’ll return to, Miss Lee and Mr. Man care for.... 
for WT, cleaning and bandaging up his foot. At the very end of the book, Mr. Man turns to his record player and begins playing music that they all dance to, bringing the book to a joyful conclusion. Editors Nicholas Boggs and Jennifer DeVere Brody note that *Little Man, Little Man* “celebrates the visibility and the vision of black childhood as it recuperates the complex humanity of these characters as individuals and also as members of a reconstituted community, even a nonbiological family.”

But might we also reorient this claim into a different sensory domain, from the visual to the auditory? That is to say, how might we listen to the humanity and complexity of the childhood that Baldwin renders audible? Mr. Man’s record player serves as a narrative device that, through its sounding and silence, dictates affective shifts within the book. I use it to explore Baldwin’s theorizations of music, community, affect, and Black childhood in 1970s Harlem. Combining Baldwin’s writings with archival sources and secondary literatures, I argue that Baldwin’s work not only encourages us to reconsider normative notions of childhood innocence, but also makes a case for music’s ability to create joyful, intergenerational community that is necessary to sustain struggles for racial justice (Figure 1).

**Baldwin on Childhood**

Any exploration of *Little Man, Little Man* should consider the way Baldwin theorized childhood. In *Little Man, Little Man*, he makes the banality of urban drug addiction and police violence painfully clear through the perspectives of the children in the story. For example, a police chase is rendered with whimsy as TJ imagines the various scenarios that could transpire as a Black man attempts to escape the police. TJ runs through six pages of scenarios for how the man could try to escape, with images of the man running displayed on TV screens and film reels. In doing so, Baldwin alludes to media representations of Black criminality. He writes in what he calls “black English,” a departure from his other writings. Because the book recuperates a literal childhood, it decouples African American Vernacular English (AAVE) from readings that wield childishness as a tool of racist infantilization. When combined with a childlike stream-of-consciousness, Baldwin’s use of Black English creates a distinctive authorial voice that seeks accurate representation rather than infantilization (Figures 2 and 3):

One thing for sure, by the time the cops get this far they know they got their man. He sweating and running and ducking but he done for. He not going to get off this street alive. Sometime he running down the middle of the street and the guns go pow! and blam! he fall and maybe he turn over twice before he hiccup and don’t move no more. Sometime he come somersaulting down from the fire-escape. Sometime it from the roof, and then he scream.

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7. Thanks to Matt Sakakeeny for encouraging more thought on this.
The blur between truth and fiction in this scene is instructive. Baldwin could have simply battled media representations of Black criminality by rendering a relatively sterile portrait of childhood, but that would ignore the lived experiences of neighborhood disinvestment, the criminalization of drug use, and racist policing. *Little Man, Little Man* diverges from a canon of African American children's literature that sought to portray Black children as innocent, often at the expense of realistically contending with the country's systemic racism. The book, however, is also a “representative aberration” that exemplifies other African American children's books of its era. The way Baldwin contends with “adult themes” in *Little Man, Little Man* seems largely responsible for the confusion.


over the book’s audiences and the lukewarm review from Julius Lester. Instead of reaching for a non-existent childhood innocence, Baldwin made a much broader critique, seeking to challenge the notion of innocence itself. In the white imagination, childhood is conceptualized in a line of thought that can be traced through white state-of-nature philosophers.
like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that children were inherently innocent and only become corrupt through socialization.\textsuperscript{11} Rather than assume the innate goodness of innocence, Baldwin compellingly positions innocence itself as a crime. In the essay, \textit{Stranger in the Village}, he makes the very direct argument that Black children aren’t innocent.\textsuperscript{32} He refers to innocence not as an antonym of guilty but in the sense of, as Michelle Elam writes, “willed self-deception to both the historical and present realities of the world.”\textsuperscript{13} Baldwin means innocence in the epistemological or phenomenological sense, not the juridical.\textsuperscript{14} He states that “anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.”\textsuperscript{15} By not inspecting the colonial and racist past of the United States that gave rise to similar conditions in the present, Americans maintain a mythological innocence that is wielded violently against African Americans upon whom the guilt of the entire country is displaced. The slogan “Make America Great Again,” for example, directly references this mythology of national innocence in its supposed lack of consciousness about the nation’s violence, its nostalgia for a racially unjust past, and its desire for a white supremacist future. Instead of reclaiming the white liberal ideology of childhood innocence that comes directly from Rousseau’s line of thinking (and the white imagination more broadly), Baldwin questions the entire ideology of innocence, noting that “[i]t is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”\textsuperscript{16} Childhood provides us a means of understanding innocence in all of its epistemological, experiential, and juridical slippages.

Writing in the wake of the civil rights movement, Baldwin contrasted the coming into consciousness of white Americans and Black Americans, arguing that white Americans become conscious of structural racism much later in life, if at all. Along lines of race, a very different script of socialization emerges. As he put it,

\begin{quote}
it is a very different matter, and results in a very different intelligence, to grow up under the necessity of questioning everything—everything, from the question of one’s identity to the literal, brutal question of how to save one’s life in order to begin to live it. White children, in the main, and whether they are rich or poor, grow up with a grasp of reality so feeble that they can very accurately be described as deluded—about themselves and the world they live in.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Speaking of his own experience growing up in the Black, low-income urban space of Harlem, Baldwin maintained that most African American children grow up with the mythology of American innocence quickly dispelled. In \textit{Little Man, Little Man}, TJ, WT,
and Blinky are not naive or unknowing. Instead, they become aware of the social forces in which they exist. The socialization of Black children, while precarious, also gives way to clarity, insight, and epistemic privilege.

In a long conversation with Margaret Mead, Baldwin ardently claimed that “[a]dults are rare. Most people are grown-up children. And history is a concept which exists in nearly nobody’s mind.” To mature or become an adult was to learn of the country’s history and to be able to make some sense of it. It was to view the violence of the United States in present social conditions and to understand whence it came. Those whom he called “the chorus of the innocents”—that is to say, white America, by and large—were those who had not come to consciousness and understood the systems underpinning the racist constraints of a past that is not yet past. For Baldwin, history was and is the present.

He looked to the unfinished past to tackle “serious” issues: the resonances of slavery, segregation, the effects of redlining, the criminalization of blackness, and police surveillance. At the same time, he was invested in children as an obligation for the future. In *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, he called the young “the community’s sacred—and only—hope,” wherein hope is a forward-looking, affective state for the not-yet-extant. Baldwin’s idea of childhood is a hopeful one wherein Black kids have a future. His queer future was—and is—fundamentally relational and optimistic. Children and childhood hold hope for future realities and represent the possibility of rupturing the existing social order. Baldwin often constituted his alternative family through the church, or, in the case of *Little Man, Little Man*, through music that permeates public and private spaces to create community.

**Baldwin on Music and Affect**

Music and affect play a prominent role in *Little Man, Little Man* and throughout Baldwin’s writings more generally. Baldwin claimed he didn’t “know anything about

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19. As Brittney Cooper, drawing on the work of Anna Julia Cooper notes, positions often viewed as marginalizations are in fact positions of epistemic privilege. Blackness is not abject but rather allows for a certain clarity in understanding. Brittney C. Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).


22. In his much more eloquent words, “History, I contend, is the present—we, with every breath we take, every move we make, are history—and what goes around comes around.” James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), xvi.


25. Conversations with Nicholas Boggs about Baldwin’s time in the south of France have only strengthened and broadened this argument. Boggs told me that music had a transatlantic reach in the unification of friends and lovers in his alternative family.
music," though this claim is undercut by the myriad ways he described and used music in his writing. There, we find a particularly salient theory of music and affect. When I had the opportunity to ask Baldwin's nephew Tejan about the presence of music in the text, his answer offered a cursory overview that gives us an idea of music’s importance and the symbolic significance of Mr. Man’s record player in Little Man, Little Man:

Music is one of the main elements of the book. It begins with music. Yoran's first illustration on the opening page is of music all up and down the street. And, along with all of the other symbols, Mr. Man’s record player looms largely through the book, through WT's injury. During the Miss Beanpole scene, it actually says that Mr. Man stops his record player and you see a finger—Yoran draws a finger pressing “stop” on the record player. You know, there’s no music happening during that dark passage—I call it the “Miss Beanpole Matrix.”

Tejan makes a point to mention not only sound, but silence. In what Tejan terms the “Miss Beanpole Matrix,” TJ’s neighbor Miss Beanpole calls down to him from her window (Figure 4). She asks him to go to the store and he enters her apartment through “a lot of locks on her door." In the Miss Beanpole Matrix, TJ experiences anxiety that, were it not for the re-entering of music, might manifest itself in fear and terror. This anxiety seems to originate in Miss Beanpole’s separation from the community in her solitary apartment. Keeping Baldwin’s own life in mind, it might also come from a terrifying experience he had as a child. Baldwin had his first knowing encounter with racial profiling when he was ten years old and running an errand for his father. He was pushed to the ground by grown police officers for simply running home through the cold of the night. Years later, he relayed to Dick Cavett in an interview that it was a touchstone in his life and the “beginning of my discovery of what it meant to be a Black man in this country." Though TJ, WT, and Blinky run errands for both Miss Beanpole and Miss Lee without this experience, with Baldwin’s biography in mind, one gets the sense that their playfulness could end at any moment, especially as the book talks about police chasing a man down the street or the boys who sit on the stoop and “shoot that dope in their veins.” (Figure 5). During the Miss Beanpole Matrix, TJ also explores his fear of losing his parents, noting the precarity of Black life and fear of violence against Black families (“When he wake up scared, in the

27. This quote, orginally a response to my question at the book’s re-release, has been edited by Tejan Karefa-Smart and me for clarity. For the original, see Jacqueline Woodson et al., “Home To Harlem Talks: Little Man, Little Man by James Baldwin” (Book Launch, 13 September 2018).
29. The Dick Cavett Show, “Episode 176,” YouTube video, 5:16, 1 June 1971, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfoRZ5zupyQ. In Baldwin’s final interview, conducted by Quincy Troupe, he evocatively told of this experience, explaining that, “I knew that [the cops] knew that I was seven or eight or nine and they were just having fun with me. They wanted me to beg. And I couldn’t beg, so I got my ass kicked. But I learned a lot, a lot about them. I learned there were very few who were humane; they just wanted you to say what they wanted you to say. They wanted to be confirmed in something by you. By your face, by your terror of them.” James Baldwin, “The Last Interview: Interview by Quincy Troupe,” in James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2014), 91.
middle of the night, he always got this feeling that maybe something awful done happened to his Mama and Daddy” 31). The book explores these topics with a playfulness that renders them commonplace. Baldwin saw music as providing a salve for these affective consequences of precarity. 32 Discussing his 1979 novel, Just Above My Head, he made this clear: “I tried to deal with what I was most afraid of. That’s why the vehicle of the book is music. Because music was and is my salvation.” 33

32. Comparing the fear of losing his parents with the feeling he has in Miss Beanpole’s apartment, TJ notes that “[h]e not scared of Miss Beanpole the way he scared at night. And if he so scared of her, why he all the time in her house? No, he ain’t exactly scared.” Baldwin, Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood, 62.
Just as fear begins to envelop TJ while in the Miss Beanpole Matrix, Mr. Man’s record player draws TJ back into his community, its sound emanating from the downstairs window. Sound, like affect, can broadly be considered the space between people. The sound of Mr. Man’s record player enables this community, entering when Baldwin most viscerally describes the terror and pain of the book’s characters. This use of music in the text to shift affective registers, while not always structurally clear in the published book, is intentional. In an early manuscript for the book, Baldwin drew in section breaks with blue and purple pen right after two junctures in the book: (1) after describing WT’s dealings with his brother whose life was threatened by a heroin overdose and (2) after Miss Lee is revealed to be an alcoholic. After each of these instances, Baldwin cuts to the record player. Music offers a form of salvation and a means of creating community. In the book’s conclusion, music brings Miss Lee, Mr. Man, TJ, WT, and Blinky together through dance.

In “The Uses of the Blues,” an essay Baldwin originally published in 1964, he outlines a theory of affect using “the blues” not to reference the musical genre, but rather to refer to “the experience of life, or the state of being, out of which the blues come.” The title,
he notes, just as easily could have been “The Uses of Anguish” or “The Uses of Pain,” for example. Like many theorists of Black aesthetics, Baldwin uses music as a chief way of articulating a kind of metaphysics of blackness. Elsewhere, he refers to the blues explicitly as a musical genre, though the genre remains tethered to a broader affective understanding of blackness that extends beyond any unitary musical genre. Baldwin said of jazz and the blues:

In all jazz, and especially in the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged. White Americans seem to feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad, and that, God help us, is exactly the way most white Americans sing them—sounding, in both cases, so helplessly, defenselessly fatuous that one dare not speculate on the temperature of the deep freeze from which issue their brave and sexless little voices. Only people who have been “down the line,” as the song puts it, know what this music is about.

Rather than frame the blues as something that moves its practitioners and audience between two poles of a sadness/happiness binary, Baldwin makes it about experiences of joy. It is only through emotional hardship that one can experience joy, which he calls “a true state . . . [which] has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk about happiness.” This view closely aligns itself with that of feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, who argues that happiness is often employed in means antithetical to justice. The figure of the “happy housewife” or the “happy slave” are just two salient examples. Happiness is posited as something to be achieved through very normative means—the American dream, for example, which, in Baldwin’s words, has become “something much more closely resembling a nightmare.” Whereas happiness obscures structures, concealing around normativity and an always deferred promise (it’s about the pursuit of happiness, which is nothing more than “cruel optimism”), joy is to be experienced with a certain clarity that comes only through consciousness, pain, anguish, and the understanding of them; one must have already been “down the line,” as the expression goes. The joy that is enabled through music is not the always-out-of-reach end goal of happiness. Rather, it is an intermittently experienced affect that is necessary for sustaining struggle, the kind of “wake work” Christina Sharpe writes so poignantly about.

Toward the book’s end, Miss Lee drops a bottle from the roof and WT cuts his foot on it: “WT got that hole in his sneaker and he done stepped on the glass and his foot bleeding something awful (Figure 6).” As blood pours from his foot, the children run to Mr. Man and Miss Lee for help. In the basement where they live, the adult protagonists care for WT, propping him up in bed and lovingly bandaging his foot. Mr. Man scolds Miss Lee for her carelessness in words that are fully comprehended only by Blinky who, in her lack of epistemic innocence teaches TJ that Miss Lee “been sick . . . She real sick.” In these final pages, TJ becomes “more scared now than he ever been at Miss Beanpole’s house . . . more scared than he ever been before, and he don’t know why (Figure 7).”

As in earlier scenes, Mr. Man’s record player brings the protagonists together as Mr. Man hits the button on the machine (“It like he got to do something with his hands and he don’t know what else to do”). Blinky begins dancing, and sound enables the children and adults to constitute a queer family. Kinship in Little Man, Little Man is drawn lovingly between the children and their neighbors. For Baldwin—or Uncle Jimmy, as he was known to his many nephews and nieces—children carried the kind of hope that made struggle, if not worthwhile, then certainly possible. Through the music of Mr. Man’s record player, the characters of Little Man, Little Man are able to work through the literal physical pain of WT’s injury and the emotional pain of Miss Lee’s alcoholism as they

42. Baldwin, Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood, 77.
44. Baldwin, Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood, 91.
45. Baldwin, Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood, 86.
lovingly care for each other. They create a joyful community, or as Nicholas Boggs notes, a “nonbiological family,” in another early draft of *Little Man, Little Man* that contained

very brief character sketches and only the most essential elements of the plot, the last two lines, set up by the playing of Mr. Man’s record player read:

“Listen!” says Ray Charles.
And they all dance together.

“Listen,” it turns out, is Ray Charles’ exhortation at the beginning of his 1967 recording, “You Made Me Love You (I Didn’t Wanna Do It),” where Charles sings of love and its many difficulties. Following this instruction, how might we listen to the childhood Baldwin makes audible? Amidst the wistful, mid-tempo big band arrangement and Charles’s voice, Baldwin urges us to tune into the many experiences of Black childhood. With his signature mix of honesty and vulnerability, he shows us joy and pain, hope and fear, and he does it through the hiss and crackle of Mr. Man’s record player, as it plays music all up and down the street.

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