The Theology and Poetics of Sin and Punishment in Go Tell it on the Mountain

Babacar Mbaye
Dedication

To my friend and colleague Gay Wilentz
(September 1, 1950—February 6, 2006) scholar, pioneer, and teacher.
We shared many conversations.
Gay was small in stature, but she cast a large shadow, and her shadow gave
voice and power to the poor, exploited, marginalized, and oppressed across the
world.
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17 The Theology and Poetics of Sin and Punishment
in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*
Babacar M'Baye

This paper explores the ways in which James Baldwin's 1953 novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain* reflects a diversity of religious cultural elements that have parallels in European-American and African religious worldviews and poetic traditions. On the one hand, the paper will discuss how the cultural elements in the book reflect traits that are traceable to Biblical and Puritanical interpretation of sin and divine punishment. Second, the paper will describe how the Biblical and Puritanical ideas about sin and punishment that Baldwin uses are blended with patterns from a diversity of African cultures.

The outline of the paper is as follows. First, this paper will describe the plot and historical context of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Second, the paper will identify the elements from Biblical and Puritanical theology of Sin that Baldwin appropriates in order to discuss his childhood and race relations in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century. Third, this paper will analyze Baldwin's use of a Biblical theology of sin through a language that recalls the worldview of a diversity of traditional West-African Islamic societies. Finally, this paper will examine the Biblical sermons that Gabriel Grimes, one of the major characters in *Mountain*, delivers in a manner that is quite similar to how the griot [African traditional poet and historian] tells an epic.

*Go Tell it on the Mountain* emerged out of a turbulent social and political context. In *Mountain*, Baldwin represents the racial violence and lynching cycles that tore apart the American nation in the first half of the twentieth century. This violence is suggested in the scene in which Gabriel walks the
The influence of European-American Theology of Sin in Go Tell it on the Mountain

Go Tell it on the Mountain discusses the cultural intimacies and ideological conflicts between Blacks and Whites in the United States. On the one hand, Mountain reflects traits that have parallels in Puritan theology. On the other hand, the book shows the influence of European-American culture on John, who is the major character of Mountain. In the novel, Baldwin explores issues of racial conflicts between Blacks and Whites as well as ideas of cross-cultural and cross-racial unity that he considers very important in the relationships between African-Americans and European-Americans.

In Mountain, the influence of Euro-American culture is visible in the religious discourse that Baldwin’s characters develop in order to define their identity in relation to White culture and the West. Early in the book, Gabriel develops a Puritanical theology of terror and damnation against his adoptive son John and his biological offspring, Royal. Gabriel’s theology is rooted in a traditional European Christian worldview that interpreted Black suffering as part of a divine course of Justice resulting from Noah’s curse of his son Ham. As told in the Bible, Ham, who was one of the sons of Noah, saw his father lying in his tent drunk and naked. Knowing that Ham did not look away when he saw him, Noah got angry and cursed Canaan, the son of Ham. The story of Noah influences the manner in which John and Gabriel explain their relationships with each other. John believes that he sinned by imagining his father’s nakedness. The narrator describes:

Yes, he [John] had sinned: one morning, alone, in the dirty bathroom, in the square, dirt-gray cupboard room that was filled with the stink of his father. Sometimes, leaning over the cracked, “tattle-tale gray” bathtub, he scrubbed his father’s back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod. Then he hated his father, and longed for the power to cut his father down.

Was this why he lay there, thrust out from all human or heavenly help tonight? This, and not that other, his deadly sin, having looked on his father’s nakedness and mocked and cursed him in his heart? Ah, that son of Noah had been cursed, down to the present growing generation: A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. (197)

As this statement suggests, John believes that his predicament derives from the curse that Noah made against his son Ham. John makes a connection between Noah’s naked body—that Ham stared at and the bare torso of Gabriel that he [John] saw. John’s belief that he has sinned against his father and his conviction that this act is connected with Ham is a product of his European Christian upbringing. Intrinsic in Christian theology is the idea that Blacks are a
cursed people who are suffering since the time of Ham’s damnation. As Susan Gubar argues in *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, this theology has been used to pathologize Black people on both sides of the Atlantic and justify their economic and social exploitation. This theology of damnation permeates the worldview of Gabriel Grimes who uses it in his sermons. In the middle of *Mountain*, Gabriel delivers a speech to a congregation led by a group of preachers called the Twenty Four Elders. Gabriel’s lecture is as follows:

For let us remember that the wages of sin is death; that it is written, and cannot fail, the soul that sinneth, it shall die. Let us remember that we are born in sin, in sin did our mothers conceive us—sin reigns in all our members, sin is the foul heart’s natural liquid, sin looks out of the eye, amen, and leads to lust, sin is in the hearing of the ear, and leads to folly, sin sits on the tongue, and leads to murder. Yes! Sin is the only heritage of the natural man, sin bequeathed us by our natural father, that fallen Adam, whose apple sickens and will sicken all generations living, and generations unborn! (103-104)

Gabriel’s representation of sin as an intrinsic part of human nature is traceable to Puritan theology in which sin is represented as an element that permeates life. Gabriel’s imagery of sin as an organism that grows into human beings permanently is analogous to Thomas Hooker’s description of evil as a part of life. In *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, Perry Miller has an essay entitled “A True Sight of Sin,” in which Thomas Hooker, a late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Puritan leader and Philosopher, wrote: “We are all sinners, it is my infirmity, I cannot help it; my weakness, I cannot be rid of it” (153). Hooker also said that sin was “a desperate malignity in the temper of the stomach that should turn our meat and diet into diseases, the best cordials and preservatives into poisons, so that what in reason is appointed to nourish a man should kill him” (162). Like Gabriel, Hooker uses a biological language in which the female stomach is represented as the birthplace of sin. In addition, like Gabriel, Hooker believes that sin permeates human existence.

Another parallel between Gabriel’s and Hooker’s theology is their representation of sin as a sign of divine punishment. Hooker said that sin was “the greatest evil in the world, or indeed that can be. For that which separates the soul from God, that which brings evils of punishment and makes all evils truly evil, and spoils all good things to us, that most needs be the greatest evil” (162). This fundamentalist vision of sin and punishment is the source of the theology in *Mountain*. In his reminiscence of his past life, Gabriel describes his relationships with the outside world in a language that draws heavily on orthodox notions of sin, damnation, and fear. Gabriel is always anxious and guilt-ridden when he imagines his adulterous affair with Esther, the mother of his deceased son Royal, as an act that has brought a curse in his life. While praying in the Temple, Gabriel remembers “the curse repeated, so far, so long resounding, that the mother of his first son had uttered as she thrust the infant from her—herself immediately departing, this curse yet on her lips, into eternity” (114). Gabriel believes that Esther cursed him when she was delivering Royal, reminding the preacher of his sin and cruelty toward a woman he did not support. This belief in a predestined omen sheds Gabriel’s life, leading him to imagine what the other churchgoers would say about him if only they knew that he was an adulterer and a sinner, not a saint. When he prays, Gabriel imagines that “They [the congregation] seemed suddenly to mock him, to stand in judgment on him; he saw his guilt in everybody’s eyes. When he stood in the pulpit to preach they looked at him, he felt, as though he had no right to be there, as though they condemned him” (135-136).

Gabriel’s confusion impels him to seek refuge in faith. He stands near the altar and prays for forgiveness and rebirth: “Have your way, Lord / Have your way” (113) and “I’ll obey, Lord / I’ll obey” (114). This prayer helps Gabriel regain his faith and begin to believe that he can prevent others from sinning. He promises to save the soul of his wife Elizabeth—whom he married when he moved to New York to live with Florence. At this point, Gabriel can remember the words he had told Elizabeth the day when he proposed to her: “Sister Elizabeth,” he said, “the Lord’s been speaking to my heart, and I believe it’s His will that you and me should be man and wife. . . . I done been down the line. . . . and maybe I can keep you from making some of my mistakes, bless the Lord. . . . maybe I can help keep your foot from stumbling. . . . again” (187). Gabriel’s belief that the Lord spoke to him and gave him power to keep people from sinning convinced Elizabeth to surrender to his authority. Elizabeth agreed to the marriage and saw a sign of God’s presence in Gabriel, “a sign that He is mighty to save” (188).

The theology of sin and suffering that Gabriel develops has negative effects on the lives of the Grimes family. The effects are visible in how Gabriel attempts to make John hate White people and surrender to a fundamentalist psychology of terror. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin defines this psychology as “the terror of domination” of “medieval times, which sought to exorcize evil by burning witches,” (13). One example of terror is when Gabriel attempts to make John fear White people by telling him that they do not like Black people. When Roy is brought home after he has been stabbed by a White gang, Gabriel tells John “You see. . . . It was white folks, some of them white folks you like so much tried to cut your brother’s throat” (45). This statement shows how Gabriel uses John as a scapegoat for his own powerlessness toward White oppression. Because he is unable to deal with racial subjugation, Gabriel ends up projecting his fear and weakness on John whom he perceives as both an accomplice and a victim in the evildoing of Whites. “With the air of one forcing the sinner to look down into the pit that is to be his portion” Gabriel “moved away slightly so that John could see Roy’s wound” (45).
Later, when standing near Roy, Gabriel tells Elizabeth: “You can tell that foolish son of yours something... him standing there with them big buckeyes. You can tell him to take this like a warning from the Lord. This is what white folks does to niggers. I been telling you, now you see” (46). As this quotation suggests, Gabriel perceives himself as victim of a destructive “White evil” in which he sees John as a participant. Gabriel’s representation of Whiteness in negative terms is an irrational sentiment that is rooted in the fear that centuries of violence, discrimination, and injustices on Black people trigger in his consciousness. Discussing Gabriel’s attitude toward John, Fern Marja Eckman argues in *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* that it invokes the terror that David Baldwin, Baldwin’s stepfather, created in his son’s consciousness by making him feel that he could not succeed in the White man’s world.

Yet Gabriel’s fear cannot be dismissed as an irrational sentiment since it is an effect of White-on-Black violence. Gabriel’s response derives from what Baldwin describes in *Rap on Race* as “the fears of white people” to recognize that “Blacks are involved with the American people and in American life” (3). As Margaret Mead argues in *Rap on Race*, this is the fear of admitting that Blacks and Whites have a blood relationship and a common experience (6). The paradox that Baldwin and Mead perceive in American culture comes from the history of racism and discrimination that Blacks have endured in the United States. The history creates a dilemma and powerlessness that the African-American feels for being socially alienated. Baldwin described this feeling in “The American Dream,” a speech that he gave in Oxford, England in 1965:

> It comes as a great shock to discover that the country, which is your birthplace, and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. The disaffection and the gap between people, only on the basis of their skins, begins there and accelerates throughout your whole lifetime. You realize that you are 30 and you are having a terrible time. You have been through a certain kind of mill and the most serious effect is again not the catalogue of disaster—the policeman, the taxi driver, the waiters, the landlady, the banks, the insurance companies, the millions of details 24 hours of every day which spell out to you that you are a worthless human being. It is not that. By that time, you have begun to see it happening in your daughter, your son or your niece or your nephew. You are 30 by now and nothing you have done has helped you to escape the trap. But what is worse is that nothing you have done, and as far as you can tell nothing you can do, will save your son or your daughter from having the same disaster and from coming to the same end. (32-33)

Baldwin’s argument that alienation in Black life was a result of White denial came at a point when he wanted to take his stepfather’s rhetoric of terror and use it to resist oppression. Like John, Baldwin grew to accept his father’s idea that the Whites will not allow Blacks to succeed. Gabriel’s anti-White rhetoric, which echoes that of David Baldwin, was a conservative and fatalistic theology that Baldwin often used to criticize European-Americans. As Fern Marja Eckman explains, by the end of the 1960s, Baldwin began to accept hesitantly his father’s idea that Blacks were victims of “the economic and social ramifications of the white man’s theory” and became “the guardian of David Baldwin’s anger” which “burns steadily, like a sacred flame” (27). The power of David Baldwin’s ideology on James Baldwin is visible in how John, Baldwin’s persona, wants to use his father’s anger and crush the people and lights of New York City. Like John, Baldwin, at one point, wanted to use David Baldwin’s “sacred flame” as a weapon against White America. These sentiments of death wish and apocalypse towards White people identify the stage when Baldwin was angry the most about his conditions of being a Black man in America. In *Notes of Native Son*, Baldwin writes:

> This was the time of what was called the “brownouts,” when the lights in all American cities were very dim. When we re-entered the streets something happened to me, which had the force of an optical illusion, or a nightmare. The streets were very crowded and I was facing north. People were moving in every direction but it seemed to me, in that instant, that all of the people I could see, and many more than that, were moving toward me, against me, and that everyone was white. I remember how their faces gleamed. And I felt, like a physical sensation, a click at the nape of my neck as though some interior string connecting my head to my body had been cut. I began to walk. I heard my friend call after me, but I ignored him. Heaven only knows what was going on in his mind, but he had the good sense not to touch me—I don’t know what would have happened if he had—and to keep me in sight. I certainly had no conscious plan. I wanted to do something to crush these white faces, which were crushing me. I walked for perhaps a block or two until I came to an enormous, glittering, and fashionable restaurant in which I knew not even the intercession of the Virgin would cause me to be served. I pushed through the doors and took the first vacant seat I saw, at a table for two, and waited. (80)

This statement suggests the analogy between Baldwin and John, which is their nervousness and alienation in the White world. Like Baldwin, John feels as if he were the only Black man in a world dominated by Whites. Yet, John’s feeling about Whites is rarely consistent. John’s journey in White culture begins in the morning of his fourteenth birthday when he goes downtown and spends a few coins that his mother gave him as a present. On his way to the movie theatre, where he intends to spend the money, John goes to the top of a hill situated in the middle of Central Park, New York, and observes the city in all its dimensions with a full sense of the power and privilege that he [John] can have
in America and in the West. The narrator describes in the scene as follows:

In Central Park, the snow had not yet melted on his favorite hill. This hill was in the center of the park, after he had left the circle of the reservoir, where he always found, outside the high wall of crossed wire, ladies, white, in fur coats, walking their great dogs, or old, white gentlemen with canes. At a point that he knew by instinct and by the shape of the buildings surrounding the park, he struck out on a steep path overgrown with trees, and climbed a short distance until he reached the clearing that led to the hill. Before him, then, the slope stretched upward, and above it the brilliant sky, and beyond it, cloudy, and far away, he saw the skyline of New York. He did not know why, but there arose in him exultation and a sense of power, and he ran up the hill like an engine, or a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him. (33)

This passage suggests John’s ambivalent attitude about White culture. On the one hand, John is attracted to White culture. He is thrilled to discern the wealth and elegance of rich White women and men who walk in Central Park, wrapped in “fur,” holding “canes,” or walking their dogs. John’s fascination with the aura and leisure of the White promenaders reflects his desire to be associated with a European culture in which he sees himself as a participant. As visible in his position on top of the hill, John perceives himself as an insider who knows the secret of the West and who is aware of the education and higher possibilities that the city can give him. In this sense, John is the persona of Baldwin who was in love with the city for the discovery and adventure that it gives to the soul-searching individual. In his essay “Black City Lights: Baldwin’s City of the Just,” James M. Hughes describes Baldwin as a cosmopolitan intellectual who, like Henry James and Walt Whitman, found the American city as “a bridge to the European city” (234-235). Hughes’ statement gives the impression that the American city gave Baldwin the means to transcend racism and celebrate universalism in Europe. Although it is fair to say that Baldwin used New York as a passage to Europe, one must admit that the city was, for him, more a site where the dilemma of race was acute than anything else. The city is the place where Baldwin became aware of injustice and dualisms. Baldwin’s ambivalence is visible in John’s attitude toward the city. Although he is attracted to the wealth and leisure in Central Park, as Baldwin was to the city, John realizes that the overseeing position that he occupies on top of the hill is hardly comfortable since it makes him feel angry with White people. John’s anger at Whites is visible in the narrator’s description of how “he [John] ran up the hill like an engine, or a madman, willing to throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him” (33). Later, a sudden force makes John want to destroy the city and its people. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

When he reached the summit he paused; he stood on the crest of the hill, hands clasped beneath his chin, looking down. Then he, John, felt like a giant who might crumble this city with his anger; he felt like a tyrant who might crush this city beneath his heel; he felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn, and before whom multitudes cried, Hosanna! (33)

John’s violent urge to crush the city of New York expresses his hatred of Whites for keeping Blacks in poverty. John blames Whites for expecting him to live and work in the Broadway, “where the houses did not rise” and “where the streets and the hallways and the rooms were dark, and where the unconquerable odor of dust, and sweat, and urine, and homemade gin” polluted the atmosphere (34). This gloomy picture of a poor and unclean Broadway gives John a sense of legitimacy for wanting to kill White people. John’s death wish comes from his dissatisfaction with the discrimination and unemployment that he notes in the lives of Blacks in Harlem. When he thinks about Gabriel’s economic life, John sees it as a “narrow way” where “he would grow old and black with hunger and toil” (34).

John’s realization of the predicament that he could face in the future is rooted in the history of economic and social injustice that besieged Harlem in the middle of the twentieth century. The Harlem of the 1950s and 60s in which John would have become an adult was terribly poor. In Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Gilbert Osofsky describes this Harlem as a neighborhood where 91 percent of homes were classified as slums (193). As Osofsky has argued, about half of the Harlem youngsters who went to high school during the 1950s and 60s dropped out before completing their degrees (200).

In Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power, Kenneth B. Clark gave more startling statistics. According to Clark, the median income of Blacks in Harlem between 1940 and 1960 was $3, 480 compared to $5, 103 for White residents of New York City (35). Half the families in Harlem had incomes under $4,000, while 75 percent of all New York City residents earned more than $4,000 (35). As Clark argued, only one in twenty-five Black families in Harlem had an income above $10,000, while more than four in twenty-five of the White families did (35). These statistics show that “the Negro in Harlem found himself increasingly isolated culturally, socially, and economically by a wall of racial prejudice and discrimination” (26).

The racism that Clark described is the root of the fear and double consciousness that Black people experience in the United States. Continuous injustice is the major factor that leads John to want to “throw himself headlong into the city that glowed before him” (33). The desperation and violent urge that John and Baldwin experience in the White world is reminiscent of that “peculiar sensation” that W.E.B. Du Bois described in The Souls of Black Folk as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempl
and pity" (5). From this "peculiar sensation" of invisibility and vulnerability toward an "amused contempt and pity" of Whites, there emerges in the Black psyche a desire to take action in self-expression and in thought, a process that Du Bois and Cornel West called "strivings." These "strivings" identify "the quasi-mystical" power to reinvent oneself that African-Americans have developed in order to resist oppression. As Eric J. Sundquist points out in To Wake The Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature, Du Bois' notion of "Black Strivings" elaborates "on his view that the racist denial of opportunity to blacks in America has allowed 'the power of body and mind' to be 'wasted and dispersed'" (486). In this sense, "Black Strivings" is a dormant power of self-transformation and self-preservation lying beneath the ambiguous double-consciousness of the African-American. As Du Bois wrote:

Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness—it is the contradiction of double aims. The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and hail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde—could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause. (5-6)

This statement stresses the regenerative skill that African-Americans acquire from the experience of longing for cultural identity and economic advancement in America. Du Bois, then, like Baldwin, recognizes the capacity of African-Americans to revive their unearthed energy and reconstruct their dislocated selves in order to conquer injustice. Cornel West discusses this regenerating force in Black consciousness when he states in The Future of the Race: "Black strivings are the creative and complex products of the terrifying African encounter with the absurd in America—and the absurd as America. Like any other group of human beings, black people forged ways of life and ways of struggle under circumstances not of their own choosing" (79). West's concept of "Black Strivings" as a creative way of struggle under an absurd existence is consistent with Du Bois's representation of "strivings" as a resistance against oppression in a context of dispersed Black selves.

**The African Religious and Cultural influences in Go Tell it on the Mountain**

Despite its centeredness on the Christian heritage of African-Americans, Go Tell it on the Mountain has salient cultural patterns that have parallels in West African Muslim societies such as Mali and Senegal. In Mountain, the African traits are blended with Christian patterns and are visible in the rhetorical strategies that Baldwin uses when he describes how Gabriel, the deacon of The Temple of the Fire Baptized, interacts with his congregation. In his sermons, Gabriel uses rhetorical strategies that are similar to those of the African griot [poet and historian]. The oratory devices that Gabriel uses include dramatic description of characters, emphasis on actions and time, and repetition of names. These standards are included in the following passage:

He [Gabriel] took his text from the eighteenth chapter of the second book of Samuel, the story of the young Ahimaaz who ran too soon to bring the tidings of battle to King David. For, before he ran, he was asked by Joab: "Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready?" And when Ahimaaz reached King David, who yearned to know the fate of his headlong son, Absalom, he could only say: "I saw a great tumult but I knew not what it was."

And this was the story of all those who failed to wait on the counsel of the Lord; who made themselves wise in their own conceit and ran before they had the tidings ready. This was the story of innumerable shepherds who failed, in their arrogance, to feed the hungry sheep; of many a father and mother who gave to their children not bread but a stone, who offered not the truth of God but the tinsel of this world. This was not belief but unbelief, not humility but pride: there worked in the heart of such a one the same desire that had hurled the son of the morning from Heaven to the depths of Hell, the desire to overturn the appointed times of God, and to wrest from Him who held all power in His hands powers not meet for men ... Oh, yes, they had seen it, each brother and sister beneath the sound of his voice tonight, and they had seen the destruction caused by a so lamentable unwiseness! Babies, bawling, fatherless, for bread, and girls in the gutters, sick with sin, and young men bleeding in the frosty fields. Yes, and there were those who cried—they had heard it, in their homes, and on the street corner, and from the very pulpit—that they should wait no longer, despaired and rejected and spat on as they were. (119)

Gabriel's sermon is consistent with the African-American preacher's storytelling strategy. The relationships are visible, first, in Gabriel's act of warning sinners against the hellish life that awaits them if they do not change their ways, which is a parable and a rhetorical technique that is traceable to the oral performance of the Black preacher. As James Weldon Johnson describes in his introduction to God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, the African-American preacher usually ends a sermon by invoking "the Judgment Day" or by warning or exhorting the sinners (2). According to Johnson, the use of admonition is the last stage of the preacher's sermon, following a long process during which the orator represented "the Creation, went on to the fall of man, rambled through the trials and tribulations of the Hebrew Children, [and] came down to the redemption of Christ" (1-2).
Another connection between Gabriel's sermon and Johnson's poem is the function as conveyor of the message of God that the two Gabriel characters play. The sermon "The Judgment Day," which is the last oration in God's Trombones, has a scene in which God asks the angel Gabriel to go blow "the silver trumpet" and "wake the nations underground" (54). The angel took God's message to the sinners:

Oh-o-o, sinner,
Where will you stand,
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire?
Oh, you gambling man—where will you stand?
You whore-mongering man—where will you stand?
Liars and backsliders—where will you stand,
In that great day when God's a-going to rain down fire? (55)

The function of whistle-blower and invoker of divine punishment that the angel Gabriel plays in "The Judgment Day" is analogous to that which Baldwin's Gabriel plays in Mountain. Like Johnson's Gabriel, Baldwin's Gabriel is a counselor to the Lord whose mission is to wake the sinners and urge them to leave their secular and epicurean ways, repent, and walk in the holy path before the Judgment Day comes. This profound message, which underlies both orations, suggests the wisdom, inventiveness, and emotional intensity of the African-American religious folklore and theology from which Mountain was crafted.

Yet, Baldwin's literature, including his sermons, is not comparable to African-American oration only. For example, Baldwin's Biblical narrative can be interpreted as a story about the frustration that King David felt when he found out that his son Absalom had plotted to kill him. Gabriel's tirade suggests that King David interpreted Absalom's act as a thoughtless act of pride and vanity. Despite its Biblical origin, Gabriel's sermon reflects the African griot's way of narrating an epic. This similarity is visible in how Gabriel tells the story about King David in a dramatic manner that allows the reader to see the correspondence between the lives of the two characters. Like an African griot, Gabriel impersonates the character of the epic that is being told. Gabriel's use of impersonation is noticeable in how he creates a parallelism between King David and himself. In this sense, the tension between King David and Absalom alludes to the conflict that occurs between Gabriel and his son Royal. When he walks in Harlem during a race riot, Gabriel imagines Royal's body "sprawled heavy and unmoving forever against the earth, and tears blinded his eyes" (143). In Harlem, Gabriel met Royal in the streets and saw "a blank hostility" in his eyes and "a burning cigarette [hanging] from between his lips" (142). From Gabriel's point of view, Royal's deportment is, like Absalom's, a defiance of divine law that can lead to destruction.

In addition, Gabriel's sermon refers to many names, such as Ahimaaz, King David, and Joab. This use of names in oratory is common in African epic poetry. One example is the passage in the legend of Sundjata Keita, told by Guinean historian Djeli Mamadou Kuyate, where the character of Sumanguru Kante talks with his griot Bala Faasege. The conversation, which is taken from Ralph Austen's In Search of Sunjata: The Mmande Oral Epic as History, Literature and Performance is as follows:

What is your name?
The griot replied, "My name is Nyankuma Dookha."
Sumanguru said, "I am going to take your name from you;
And apart from those with special knowledge,
No one will know your name any more.
I shall name you after my xylophone.
What I am going to do to you,
That is what I shall make your name.
The third will be your surname
Your first name is Balo;
I will cut your Achilles tendons;
Your surname is Kuyate."
They call him Bala Faasege Kuyate. (36-37)

The griot's reference to names such as Nyankuma Dookha, Sumanguru, Balo, and Kuyate is consistent with Baldwin's allusion to Ahimaaz, King David, and Joab, revealing the importance of names in African poetry on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Moreover, Baldwin's sermon and the African epic share the use of actualization, which is the storyteller's representation of the past in a vivid, theatrical, and life-like manner. One example of actualization is in the sermon above where Baldwin describes the destruction that King David saw looming towards the unbelievers (119). Gabriel's apocalyptic vision of people who fall in the "gutters" of pride shows his ability to create graphic words and images that can frighten the believers and bring them to repent for their sins. The use of this apocalyptic quality in Gabriel's sermon is traceable to African epic poetry where the speaker's ability to create graphic images is vital. For example, in the legend of Sunjata Keita, Sumanguru tells Bala Faasege "I will cut your Achilles tendons; / Your surname is Kuyate" (37). The statement suggests Sumanguru's intent to make Bala his lifetime poet and historian, deceiving the image of dismemberment that the griot uses for a theatrical purpose only.

Another parallel in Gabriel's sermon is in the way in which the preacher interacts with the audience. A patient narrator, Gabriel tells the story of King David gradually, reminding the audience that the story is unique because it describes the fate of "all those who failed to wait on the counsel of the Lord." In this statement, Gabriel creates a time and setting for the particular story that he
is about to tell. Later, he invites his audience to show interest in his story by asking, "Is there a soul here tonight?" to which the congregation replies by saying, "Yes!" "Tell it!" "Amen! You preach it, boy" (103-105). The call-and-answer exchange in the Temple of the Fire Baptized is identical to those of the Wolof people of West Africa. When Wolof listeners want to show interest in the performance of the griot artist such as the musician Youssou N'Dour, they say, "waaw waaw!" [Yes, indeed!], "eseeyey!" [Tell it!], or "deug-jaal!" [That is so true!].

The African presence in Mountain is also visible in the possession rituals in the book. When he goes to church, John Grimes, the central character, participates in a series of possession rites. Baldwin describes: "On this threshing-floor the child was the soul that struggled to the light, and it was the church that was in labor, that did not cease to push and pull, calling on the name of Jesus" (113). The trance that John experiences is traceable to the series of intense spiritual and emotional revivals that occurred in American churches during The Great Awakening. As suggested in William D. Pierson's Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England, the Great Awakening started in New England in the 1730s and 1740s when preachers of the New Light such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield began to manifest their faith in "overt physical responses such as screeching, fainting, convulsions, visions, and possession by the holy pulpit" (67). The Awakening was an important moment in the history of American Christianity since, as Pierson pointed out, it weakened "the cold, inhibited Yankee style of religion" and emphasized "felt religion," opening "the possibility of conversion without so much attention to doctrinal niceties or closely scrutinized preparation" (67-68). The Awakening was also important since it allowed the Africans to participate in the series of possession and emotional downpouring despite their limited knowledge of the Biblical texts (68).

Yet, although it is traceable to American Protestant tradition, the trance that John experiences on the floor is analogous to the possession that takes over the participants in West-African Islamic Sufi night-chants known as Jaang. These night-chants are centuries-old rituals in which Muslim congregations in Africa are joined in sequences of singing, crying, worshipping, and dancing that may last all night long. The revivals are similar to the ones in which Gabriel and his parishioners participate in a series of songs, dance, trance, and rituals.

More evidence of the similarity between West African Islamic rituals and the Christian performance in Mountain is visible in the praise singing and spirit worshipping that characterizes both of them. Baldwin represents praise singing and spirit worshipping in the scene where John is on the threshing floor. Baldwin describes:

The Lord. Immediately, two or three others cried out also, and a wind, a foretaste of that great downpouring they awaited, swept the church. With this cry, and the echoing cries, the tarry service moved from its first stage of steady murmurings, broken by moans and now again an isolated cry, into that stage of tears and groaning, of calling aloud and singing, which was like the labor of a woman about to be delivered of her child. On this threshing-floor the child was the soul that struggled to the light, and it was the church that was in labor, that did not cease to push and pull, calling on the name of Jesus. When Brother Elisha cried out and fell back, crying, Sister McCandless rose and stood over him to help him pray. For the rebirth of the soul was perpetual; only rebirth every hour could stay the hand of Satan.

Sister Price began to sing:

"I want to go through, Lord,
I want to go through.
Take me through, Lord.
Take me through." (113)

The scene reflects the influence of African-American Christianity on Go Tell it on the Mountain. The actions described in the passage are examples of the African-American religious and vernacular tradition known as "testifying." From a religious sense, "testifying" is a moment of spiritual awakening in which the African-American worshipper enters into a state of trance or possession, expressing his / her true belief in God and his / her strong desire to have privileged relationships with Him. As visible in Brother Elisha's act of falling "under the power of the Lord," the person who testifies conveys through words or action his / her beliefs in the omnipotence of God. In Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America, Geneva Smitherman writes: "To testify is to tell the truth through 'story.' In the sacred context, the subject of testifying includes such matters as visions, prophetic experiences, the experience of being saved, and testimony to the power and goodness of God" (150). In this sense, the series of wailing, moaning, calling, singing, and dancing in which the worshippers in Mountain participate is a form of "testifying" since it bears witness to their strong belief in God. Likewise, the hymn "I want to go through, Lord" that Sister Price sings is a form of "testifying," since it shows her desire to become united with God.

Yet Sister Price's song also reflects elements that are similar to those in African Islamic praise singing and spirit worshipping. The series of emotional downpouring, isolated wailing, and testimonial, singing, and dancing in which the congregation in Mountain participates is similar to those in the Wolof Jaang. Like the spiritual and physical performance in Mountain, the Senegalese Jaang is a ritual in which the participants sing, wail, worship, and dance together for hours. The rituals in the Wolof Jaang and those in the church in Mountain create social unity, respect for the ancestors, and faith in God.
An additional parallel between the performance in *Mountain* and that of the Wolof Muslim ritual is in the songs. Like Sister Price’s song, which is polyphonic in structure, the songs in the Wolof *Jaang* are often composed of two melodies sounded together. In Sister price’s song, an accented line “I want to go through, Lord” is juxtaposed to an unaccented verse “I want to go through.” In a similar way, the Wolof *Jaang* song tends to juxtapose two or more independent musical phrases that are sung in the style of a call-and-response verbal exchange. One example is the song “Mame Malick Sy” of the Senegalese band Toure Kunda.¹⁷

YA ILAHI

Coming through from God
Going through to Cheikh
Passing through to Malick (Toure).¹⁸

Like Sister’s Price’s stanza, the four verses of “Mame Malick Sy” juxtapose a series of accented and unaccented phrases that form a harmonious unit. In the Senegalese song, the first two lines of the verse “Coming through from God” and “Passing through from the Prophet” are sung in a highly pitched voice in contrast with the last two lines that are chanted in a low pitch. The first line of “YA ILAHI” is a condensed form of “La Ilaha Ila laha,” which is an Arabic phrase that translates as “there is no God but Allah.” This line may have influenced slave culture in the New World. In *Black Music of Two Worlds*, John Storm Roberts notes:

Some Jamaican hymn-singing occupies a position halfway between the British and black U.S. styles. However, a host of differences are there all the same: vocal tone, fractions of timing, backing—a whole developing tradition. Also, some African singing, especially Muslim prayer songs such as the Guinean “La Ilah Ila Allah,” available on Vogue Esoteric, makes equally striking use of long, highly decorated notes. (163)

Robert’s argument that Muslim prayer singing and spirituals have structural similarities can be corroborated when one analyzes a slave song that Michael E. Gomez documented in *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. According to Gomez, the following song was chanted by Tony William Delegal, a hundred-year-old African who lived in Currituck, Savannah, in the 1930s (174). The song goes:

Wa kem kem munin
Kum baba yano
Lai lai tambe

Delegal’s song is proof that the free slaves did not forget the traditional songs of their homeland. As Gomez argued, “The fact that Delegal (a form of Senegal?) could remember these words is itself testimony that African languages were kept alive by the African-born and passed on to descendants in certain instances” (174). As Sterling Stuckey suggested in *Going Through The Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History*, one factor that eased the survival of African languages in slave culture was that the African slaves used them to send “unspoken” information safely in songs, tales, and conversation while avoiding the reprisals of the planter (71-72).

In addition, one may argue that Delegal’s song might have come from an African Sufi psalmody. Delegal’s verse repeats the words “Lai lai lai” which is similar to the Muslim invocation “La I Lah Ia Ia Lah.” This Muslim verse is commonly heard in the religious revivals of the Senegalese Islamic sect known as the Layenne. In this sense, the expression “lai lai lai” that Delegal repeats could have from Senegal or from any parts of Africa where Islamic Sufi culture was influential during the slave trade.¹⁹

*Go Tell it on the Mountain* is a great contribution in the study of African-American literature. First, the book has sermons and worldviews that help us understand the relations between African-American culture and a diversity of traditions in the West and in Africa. The sermons and rituals in *Mountain* are a few of the numerous examples where one can find affinities between African-American and African cultures. In reflecting cultural forms that have parallels in Africa, the three books show that African-American literature is a medium that suggests the influence of African traditions in Black-American culture. In this sense, *Mountain* contributes to the studies of the African retentions in African-American culture by providing literary examples that either corroborate or dispute the theories that scholars from the disciplines of folklore, history, and literary criticism have developed on the subject. The ways in which the book reveals Africanisms that can be unnoticeable when they are described in abstract forms show that African-American literature is a medium that can help understand the African continuities in Black-American culture.

In *Mountain*, the African elements are visible in the scenes where Gabriel Grimes delivers a sermon in a manner that is similar to the African griot [poet and historian] tells an epic. Like the African *griot*, Gabriel uses oral strategies such as the dramatic representation of characters; emphases on names, time, and action; and a continuous interaction with the audience. The African
traits in *Mountain* are also visible in the series of dance, songs, trance, and intercessions in which the parishioners in The Temple of the Fire Baptized participate as they rescue John Grimes when the latter falls on the "threshing floor" of the church (113). The forms of worshipping and intercession in *Mountain* have parallels in the Wolof cultural therapeutic ceremony called *Ndeep* and in the West-African Islamic singing rituals known as *Jaang*.

Additionally, *Mountain* interrogates relations between Blacks and Whites in American society and culture. Through the voice of Gabriel Grimes, James Baldwin suggests the impact of Puritanical representation of sin and punishment in the theology in which his stepfather David Baldwin immersed him when he was a child in Harlem in the 1920s. Baldwin criticizes Gabriel Grimes for developing a European-influenced theology of terror, fear, and divine punishment that reinforces racism, exploitation, and divisions between Blacks and Whites in America. James Baldwin was a brave intellectual who spoke about race relations honestly at any cost. As one reviewer observed in Shari Dorantes Hatch’s *African-American Writers: A Dictionary*: “Never one to shy away from lashing out at European Americans for their racist practices, Baldwin also never hesitated to express his views when they conflicted with the views being touted by African Americans of his day” (13). This statement shows that Baldwin was able to get his point across with honesty without fearing retaliation.

This cross-cultural and transnational reading of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* recognizes that the cultures of the Black Diaspora are vast and need to be explored further through comparative and interdisciplinary methods. My analysis of sermons, worldviews, and ideologies in *Mountain* seeks to show the importance of African-American literature in the study of African and Diaspora currents in American culture. In the near future, I would like to explore the historical circumstances, such as the trans-Atlantic slavery and migrations, which have allowed the patterns discussed in this study to permeate American culture and become so resilient in twentieth-century African-American literature. I would also like to study the ways in which African cultures are brought to the United States and the Black Diaspora where they intermingle with various traditions. Evidently, this research will present enormous challenges since tracing African cultures to the exact places where they were brought in the Diaspora requires new definitions of the concepts of "African" and "Diaspora" histories. As Paul Lovejoy argued, "‘African history’ not only followed the slave route to the Americas and the Islamic world, but 'Diaspora history' came back to Africa with the repatriates, thereby complicating the African component in the evolution of the Diaspora. The African Diaspora came to embrace Africa itself" (*The African Diaspora* 1-2). Following Lovejoy, this paper recognizes that the history of the African Diaspora is complex, and that the relations between the peoples in the Diaspora and in Africa are ambiguous despite the resilience of Africanisms in the cultures of the Blacks in the New World.
13. In Defiant Maidens, Donald Consentino wrote: “The images that he [the griot] chooses from his vast, but finite, repertoire are unconstrained by prior thematic import and, for the most part, undetermined in narrative surface. He is thus free to modify these images according to his specifications, and to arrange them according to his wit, his will, and his intelligence” (55). See Donald Consentino, Defiant Maid and Stubborn Farmers: Tradition and Invention in Mende Story Performance (London: Cambridge UP, 1982) 55.


16. Jaang is the Wolof term for Islamic singing ritual. The word also means “to sing,” “to study” or “to worship.”

17. Toure Kunda (the Kunda family in Manding) is one of the most prominent Senegalese music groups. The band was founded in the 1977 by the Amadou Tilo Toure and his brothers Ismaila and Sixu Tidiane Toure. The Toure Kunda is one of the first bands to export African traditional music to the arena of world music in Europe. The band draws from the traditional rhythms of the Mandingo, the Wolof, and the Arab-Sufi to the modern African-American sounds of James Brown and Aretha Franklin.


YA ILAHI

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DIQGHU TCHI YALLA
DIAR TCHI YONENTE
DIAR TCHI MALICK
INEU LEUHOU MAODOK
KHALLIKA MALICK AMO MOROME

