[00:00:00]

Aaron Oforlea: Now he saw the fire of twigs and boxes piled high, flames made pale orange and yellow, and then, as a veil under the steadier light of the sun, gray blue smoke rolled upward and poured over their heads. Beyond the shifting curtain of fire and smoke, he made out first only a length of gleaming chain attached to a great limb of the tree.

Then he saw that this chain bound two Black hands together at the wrist, dirty yellow palm facing dirty yellow palm. The smoke poured up. The hands dropped out of sight. A cry went up from the crowd. Then, the hand slowly came into view again, pulled upward by the chain. This time he saw the kinky, sweaty, bloody head.

he had never before [00:01:00] seen a head with so much hair on it, hair so Black and so tangled that it seemed like another jungle. The head was hanging.

Jim Phelan: This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me. Today, I'll be talking with Aaron Oforlea, who has selected James Baldwin's \_Going to Meet the Man\_, which Baldwin published in his 1965 short story collection of the same title.

Aaron Oforlea is an Associate Professor of English at Washington State University, and like Chris Gonzalez, who is a recent guest on the podcast, is an alumnus of OSU. Aaron has cultivated significant expertise in the domains of African American literature, folklore, and rhetoric, as well as in narrative theory, medical humanities, film studies, and masculinity studies.

In 2017, he published a book entitled, [00:02:00] \_James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and the Rhetorics of Black Male Subjectivity\_. This work was honored in 2018 with the College Language Association's Award for Creative Scholarship. In addition, Aaron has contributed scholarly articles in the fields of folklore, rhetoric, and literature.

Aaron, it's a pleasure to welcome you back to OSU, if only for this hour via Zoom. Is there anything you'd like our listeners to pay special attention to as you read Baldwin's \_Going to Meet the Man\_?

Aaron Oforlea: Yes. Hi, Jim. Thank you for having me. I'm looking forward to reading and discussing James Baldwin's \_Going to Meet the Man\_.

This story is more than just an exploration of a white Southern man's thoughts about race and complicity and violent racial oppression; it's an unflinching look at the toxic power of racial hatred and how white supremacy shapes both individuals and society at large. As you listen, pay close attention to Jesse's disturbing inner [00:03:00] monologue.

Baldwin pulls us into his mind to expose the depth of his racism and the violent legacy that defines his work. Notice, too, how Baldwin uses flashbacks to show how racial violence is celebrated, even passed down through generations, shaping Jesse's identity from childhood.

Numerous literary works classified as classics mirror the societal conditions prevalent during their creation.

Authors endeavor to encapsulate the positive and negative facets of the human experience. Individuals can exhibit profound love and compassion. Yet, they may also display cruelty and inhumanity. In his short narrative, \_Going to Meet the Man\_, Baldwin poignantly illustrates a disturbing aspect of humanity.

In preparation for this reading, I have made two creative decisions. First, I have [00:04:00] chosen not to use the &quot;n-word&quot;. This term carries a lengthy and painful history associated with violence and oppression. Its usage, even within analytical contexts, may perpetuate harm. By refraining from its usage, I am honoring that legacy and recognizing the significance it bears, particularly when engaging with history that critiques racism and power dynamics.

This podcast serves as a platform for thoughtful dialogue and mutual respect. And the omission of this word aids in maintaining our focus on the profound issues addressed by Baldwin and other African American scholars within both academic and public arenas. Nevertheless, there are other stereotypes and derogatory terms present in the narrative that I will articulate in order to [00:05:00] effectively convey the ethos and pathos that Baldwin sought to impart to his audience.

Jim Phelan: Okay. Thanks, Aaron, that's a very good preface. All right, everyone. Now here's Aaron Oforlea reading James Baldwin's \_Going to Meet the Man\_.

Aaron Oforlea: &quot;What's the matter?&quot; she asked. &quot;I don't know,&quot; he said, trying to laugh. &quot;I guess I'm tired.&quot; &quot;You've been working too hard,&quot; she said, &quot;I keep telling you.&quot; &quot;Well, god damn it, woman,&quot; he said, &quot;it's not my fault.&quot; He tried again. He wretchedly failed again. Then he just lay there, silent, angry, and helpless. Excitement filled him like a toothache, but it refused to enter his flesh.

He stroked her breast. This was his wife. He could not ask her to do just a little thing for him, just to help him out, just for a little while, the way he could ask an [00:06:00] &quot;n-word&quot; girl to do. He lay there, and he sighed. The image of a black girl caused a distant excitement in him, like a faraway light. But again, the excitement was more like pain.

Instead of forcing him to act, it made action impossible. &quot;Go to sleep,&quot; she said gently. &quot;You got a hard day tomorrow.&quot; &quot;Yeah,&quot; he said, and rolled over on his side, facing her, one hand still on one breast. &quot;God damn, the &quot;n-words&quot;. The black stinking coons. You'd think they'd learn. Wouldn't you think they'd learn? I mean\_, wouldn't\_ you?&quot;

&quot;They going to be out there tomorrow,&quot; she said, and took his hand away. &quot;Get some sleep.&quot; He lay there, one hand between his legs, staring at the frail sanctuary of his wife. A faint light came from the [00:07:00] shutters. The moon was full. Two dogs far away were barking at each other, back and forth, insistently, as though they were agreeing to make an appointment.

He heard a car coming north on the road, and he half sat up, his hand reaching for his holster, which was on the chair near the bed on the top of his pants. The lights hit the shutters and seemed to travel across the room and then went out. The sound of the car slipped away, he heard it hit gravel, then heard it no more.

Some liver-lipped student, probably, heading back to that college. But coming from where? His watch said it was two in the morning. They could be coming from anywhere. From out of state, most likely, and they would be at the courthouse tomorrow. The &quot;n-words&quot; were getting ready. Well, they would be ready too.

He moaned. He wanted to let whatever was in him [00:08:00] out, but it wouldn't come out. Damn, he said aloud, and turned again on his side, away from Grace, staring at the shutters. He was a big, healthy man, and he had never had any trouble sleeping, and he wasn't old enough yet to have any trouble getting it up. He was only 42, and he was a good man, a God fearing man, and he had tried to do his duty all his life, and he had been a deputy sheriff for several years.

Nothing had even bothered him before, certainly not getting it up. Sometimes, sure, like any other man, he knew that he wanted a little more spice than Grace could give him. He would drive over yonder and pick up a black piece or arrest her, it came to the same thing but he couldn't do that now, no more.

There was no telling what might happen once your ass was in the air. And they were low enough to kill a man then, too, every one of them, or the girl herself, might [00:09:00] do it, right while she was making believe you made her feel so good. The &quot;n-words&quot;. What had the God Almighty had in mind when he made &quot; n-words&quot;? Well, they were pretty good at that, alright. Damn. Damn. Goddamn.

This wasn't helping him to sleep. He turned again, toward Grace again, and moved close to her warm body. He felt something he had never felt before. He felt that he would like to hold her, hold her, hold her, and be buried in her like a child, and never have to get up in the morning again, and go down to face those faces, God, Christ, they were ugly, and never have to enter that jailhouse again and smell that smell and hear that singing; never again feel that filthy, kinky, greasy hair under his hand, never again watch those black breasts leap against the leaping cattle prod, [00:10:00] never hear those moans again or watch that blood run down or the fat lips split or the sealed eyes struggle open.

They were animals, they were no better than animals. What could be done with these people like that? Here they had been in a civilized country for years, and they still live like animals. Their houses were dark with oil cloth or cardboard in the window. The smell was enough to make you puke your guts out, and there they sit, a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every damn five minutes, and laughing and talking and playing music, like they didn't have a care in the world, and he reckoned they didn't, neither, and coming to the door, into the sunlight, just standing there, just looking foolish, not thinking of anything, but just getting back to what they were doing, saying, Yes suh, Mr.

Jesse. I surely will, Mr. Jesse. Fine weather, Mr. [00:11:00] Jesse. Why, I thank you, Mr. Jesse. He had worked for a mail order house for a while, and it had been his job to collect the payments for the stuff they bought. They were too dumb to know that they were being cheated blind, but that was no skin off his ass. He was just supposed to do his job.

They would be late. They didn't have the sense to put money aside, but it was easy to scare them, and he never really had any trouble. Hell, they all liked him, kids used to smile when he came to the door. He gave them candy, sometimes, or chewing gum, and rubbed their rough, bullet heads. Maybe the candy should have been poisoned.

Those kids were grown now. He had had trouble with one of them today. &quot;This was this &quot;n-word&quot; today,&quot; he said, and stopped; his voice sounded peculiar. He touched Grace. &quot;You awake?&quot; he asked. She mumbled something impatiently. She was probably telling him to [00:12:00] go to sleep. It was all right, he knew that he was not alone.

&quot;What a funny time,&quot; he said, &quot;to be thinking about a thing like that. You listening?&quot; She mumbled something again. He rolled over on his back. &quot;This &quot;n-word&quot; is one of the ringleaders. We had trouble with him before. We must have had him out there at the workhouse three or four times. Well, Big Jim C. and some of the boys really had to whip that &quot;n-word&quot;'s ass today.

He looked over at Grace. He could not tell whether she was listening or not. He was afraid to ask again. &quot; They had this line, you know, to register,&quot; - he laughed, but she did not - &quot;and they wouldn't stay where Big Jim C. wanted them, no, they had to start blocking the traffic all around the courthouse so couldn't nothing or nobody get through, and Big Jim C. told them to disperse and they wouldn't move. They just kept up that [00:13:00] singing, and Big Jim C. figured that the others would move if this &quot;n-word&quot; would move, him being the ringleader. But he wouldn't move, and he wouldn't let the others move, so they had to beat him and a couple of the others and they threw them in the wagon, but I didn't see this &quot;n-word&quot; till I got to the jail. They were still singing and I was supposed to make them stop. Well, I couldn't make them stop for me but I knew he could make them stop. He was lying on the ground jerking and moaning. They had threw him in the cell by himself, and blood was coming out his ears from where Big Jim C. and his boys had whipped him. Wouldn't you think they'd learn? I put the prod to him, and I jerked some more, and he kind of screamed, but he didn't have much voice left. 'You make them stop that singing,' I said to him, 'you hear me? You make them stop that singing.'

He acted like he [00:14:00] didn't hear me, and I put it to him again under his arms, and he just rolled around on the floor, and blood started coming from his mouth. He'd pissed his pants already.&quot; He paused. His mouth felt dry, and his throat was as rough as sandpaper as he talked. He began to hurt all over with that peculiar excitement, which refused to be released.

&quot;You all are going to stop your singing, I said to him, and you are going to stop coming down to the courthouse and disrupting traffic and molesting the people, and keeping us from our duties, and keeping doctors from getting to sick white women, and getting all them northerners in this town to give our town a bad name.&quot;

As he said this, he kept prodding the boy, sweat pouring from beneath the helmet he had not yet taken off. The boy rolled around in his own dirt and water and blood and tried to scream again as the prod hit his testicles. [00:15:00] But the scream did not come out, only a kind of rattle and a moan. He stopped. He was not supposed to kill the &quot;n-word&quot;.

The cell was filled with a terrible odor. The boy was still. &quot; You hear me?&quot; he called. &quot;You had enough?&quot; The singing went on. &quot;You had enough?&quot; His foot leapt out, and he had not known it was going to, and caught the boy flush on the jaw. Jesus, he thought, this ain't no &quot;n-word&quot;, this is a goddamn bull.

He screamed again, &quot;You had enough? You going to make them stop that singing now?&quot; But the boy was out. Now he was shaking worse than the boy had been shaking. He was glad no one could see him. At the same time, he felt very close to a very peculiar, particular joy. Something deep in him, and deep in his memory, was stirred, but whatever was in his memory eluded him. He took off his helmet. He walked to the cell [00:16:00] door. &quot;White man,&quot; said the boy from the floor behind him. He stopped. For some reason, he grabbed his privates.

&quot;You remember Old Julia?&quot; the boy said from the floor, with his mouth full of blood, and one eye barely open, glaring like the eye of a cat in the dark.

&quot;My grandmother's name was Mrs. Julia Blossom. Mrs. Julia Blossom. You're going to call our women by their right names yet, and those kids ain't going to stop singing. We're going to keep on singing until every one of you miserable white mothers go stark raving out of your minds.&quot; Then he closed the one eye, spat blood, and his head fell back against the floor.

He looked down at the boy, whom he had been seeing off and on for more than a year, and suddenly remembered him: Old Julia had been one of his mail order customers, a [00:17:00] nice old woman. He had not seen her for years. He supposed that she must be dead. He had walked into the yard, the boy had been sitting in a swing.

He had smiled at the boy and asked, &quot;Old Julia home?&quot; The boy looked at him for a long time before he answered, &quot;Don't no Old Julia live here.&quot; &quot; This is her house. I know her. She lived here for years.&quot; The boy shook his head. &quot;You might know an Old Julia someplace else, white man, but don't nobody by that name live here.&quot;

He watched the boy; the boy watched him. The boy certainly wasn't more than ten. White man. He didn't have time to be fooling around with some crazy kid. He yelled, &quot; Hey! Old Julia!&quot; But only silence answered him. The expression on the boy's face did not change. The sun beat down on them both, [00:18:00] still and silent.

He had the feeling that he had been caught up in a nightmare, a nightmare dreamt by a child; perhaps one of the nightmares he himself had dreamt as a child. It had that feeling, everything familiar, without undergoing any other change, had been subtly, hideously displaced. The trees, the suns, the patches of grass in the yard, the leaning porch and the weary porch steps, and the cardboard in the windows, and the black hole of the door, which looked like the entrance to a cave in the eyes of the pickaninny. He looked at the boy by and I'll passed by to go. He stopped. &quot;You want some chewing gum?&quot; The boy got down from the swing and started for the house. He said, &quot;I don't want nothing you got, white man.&quot; He walked into the house and closed the door behind. Now, the boy looked as though he [00:19:00] were dead. Jesse wanted to go over to him and pick him up and pistol whip him until the boy's head burst open like a melon.

He began to tremble with what he believed was rage, sweat, both cold and hot raced down his body, the singing filled him as though it were a weird, uncontrollable, monstrous howling rumbling up from the depths of his own belly. He felt an icy fear rise in him and raise him up, and he shouted, he howled, &quot;You lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while - your women! Here's what I got for all the black bitches in the world!&quot; Then he was, abruptly, almost too weak to stand; to his bewilderment, his horror, beneath his own fingers, he felt himself violently stiffened. With no warning at all, he dropped his hands, he stared at the boy, and he left the cell.

&quot;All that [00:20:00] singing they do,&quot; he said, &quot;All that singing.&quot; He could not remember the first time he had heard it. He had been hearing it all his life. It was the sound with which he was most familiar, though it was also the sound of which he had been least conscious, and it had always contained an obscure comfort.

They were singing to God, they were singing for mercy, and they hoped to get to heaven, and he had even sometimes felt, when looking into the eyes of some of the old women, a few of the very old men, that they were singing for mercy for his soul too. Of course, he had never thought of their heaven or what God was or could be for them.

God was the same for everyone, he supposed, and heaven was where good people went, he supposed. He had never thought much about what it meant to be a good person. He tried to be a good person and treat everybody right: it wasn't his fault if the &quot;n-words&quot; had [00:21:00] taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible for everyone to read.

Any preacher would tell you that. He was only doing his duty, protecting white people from the &quot;n-words&quot; and the &quot;n-words&quot; from themselves, and there were still lots of good &quot;n-words&quot; around. He had to remember that. They weren't all like that boy this afternoon, and the good &quot;n-words&quot; might be mighty sad to see what was happening to their people.

They would thank him when this was over, and that way they had the best of them, not quite looking him in the eye in a low voice with a little smile: We surely thank you, Mr. Jesse. From the bottom of our hearts, we thanks you. He smiled. They hadn't all gone crazy. This trouble would pass. He knew that the young people had changed some of the words to the songs.

He had scarcely listened to the words before, and he did not listen [00:22:00] to them now, but he knew that the words were different. He could hear that much. He did not know if the faces were different. He had never, before this trouble began, watched them as they sang, but he certainly did not like what he saw now.

They hated him, and this hatred was blacker than their hearts, blacker than their skins, redder than their blood, and harder by far than his club. Each day, each night, he felt worn out, aching with their smells in his nostrils and filling his lungs as though he were drowning, drowning in &quot;n-words&quot;; and it was all to be done again when he awoke.

It would never end. It would never end. Perhaps this was what the singing had meant all along. They had not been singing black folks into heaven. They had been singing white folks into hell.

Everyone felt this black suspicion in many ways, [00:23:00] but no one knew how to express it. Men, much older than he, who had been responsible for law and order much longer than he, were now more quieter than they had been, and the tone of their joke and the way that he would not quite put his finger on, had changed.

These men were his models. They had been friends to his father and they had taught him what it meant to be a man. He looked to them for courage, now. It wasn't that he didn't know that what he was doing was right. He knew that nobody had to tell him that. It was only that he missed the ease of former years.

But they didn't have much time to hang out with each other these days. They tended to stay close to their families every free minute because nobody knew what might happen next. Explosions rocked the night of their tranquil town. Each time, each man wondered silently if perhaps this time the dynamite had not fallen into the wrong [00:24:00] hands.

They thought that they knew where all the guns were, but they could not possibly know every move that was made in that secret place where the darkies lived. From time to time it was suggested that they form a posse and search the home of every &quot;n-word&quot;, but they hadn't done it yet. For one thing, this might have brought the bastards from the North down on their backs.

For another, although the &quot;n-words&quot; were scattered throughout town, down in the hollow, near the railroad tracks, way west near the mills, up on the hill, the well off ones and some out near the college, nothing seemed to happen in one part of town without the &quot;n-words&quot; immediately knowing it in the other.

This meant that they could not take them by surprise. They rarely mentioned it, but they knew that some of the &quot;n-words&quot; had guns. It stood to reason, as they said, since, after all, some of them have been in the Army. There were &quot;n-words&quot; in the army right [00:25:00] now, and God knows they wouldn't have any trouble stealing this half assed government blind.

The whole world was doing it. Look at the European countries and all those countries in Africa. They made jokes about it, bitter jokes, and they cursed the government in Washington, which had betrayed them. But they had not yet formed a posse. Now, if their town had been laid out like some towns in the North, where all the &quot;n-words&quot; lived together in one locality, they could have gone down and set fire to the houses and brought about peace that way.

If the &quot;n-words&quot; had all lived in one place, they could have kept the fire in one place, but the way this town was laid out, the fire can hardly be controlled. It would spread all over town, and the &quot;n-words&quot; would probably be helping it to spread. Still, from time to time, they spoke of doing it anyway; so that now there was [00:26:00] a real fear among them that somebody might go crazy and light the match. They rarely mentioned anything but directly related to the war that they were fighting, but this had failed to establish between them the unspoken communication of soldiers during the war. Each man in the thrilling silence, which sped outward from their exchanges, their laughters, and their anecdotes, seemed wrestling in various degrees of darkness, with a secret which he could not articulate to himself, and which, however, directly it related to the war, related yet more surely to his privacy and his past. They could no longer be sure, after all, that they had all done the same things. They had never dreamed that their privacy could contain any element of terror, could threaten, that is, to reveal itself to the [00:27:00] scrutiny of a judgment day, while remaining unreadable and inaccessible to themselves, nor had they dreamed that the past, while certainly refusing to be forgotten, could yet so stubbornly refuse to be remembered. They felt themselves mysteriously set at naught, as no longer entering into the real concerns of other people. While here, they were outnumbered, fighting to save the civilized world.

They had thought that people would care. People didn't care. Not enough, anyway, to help them. It would have been a help, really, or at least a relief, even to have been forced to surrender. Thus, they had lost, probably forever, their old and easy connection with each other. They were forced to depend on each other more, and at the same time to trust each other less.

Who could tell when one of them might not [00:28:00] betray them all, for money, or for the ease of confession? But no one dared imagine what there might be to confess. They were soldiers fighting a war, but their relationship to each other was that of accomplices in a crime. They all had to keep their mouths shut.

\_I stepped in the river at Jordan\_.

Out of the darkness of the room, out of nowhere, the line came flying up at him. With the melody and the beat, he turned wordlessly toward his sleeping wife.

\_I stepped in the river at Jordan\_.

Where have you heard that song? &quot;Grace,&quot; he whispered, &quot;You awake?&quot; She did not answer.

If she was awake, she wanted him to sleep. Her breathing was slow and easy. Her body slowly rose and fell.

\_I stepped in the river at Jordan. The water came to my knees\_.

He began to [00:29:00] sweat. He felt an overwhelming fear, which yet contained a curious and dreadful pleasure.

\_I stepped in the river at Jordan.\_ \_The water came to my waist.\_

It had been night, as it was now. He was in the car between his mother and his father, sleepy, his head in his mother's lap, sleepy, and yet full of excitement. The singing came from far away, across the dark fields. There were no lights anywhere. They had said goodbye to all the others and turned off on this dark dirt road. They were almost home.

\_I stepped in the river at Jordan. The water came over my head. I looked way over to the other side. He was making up my dying bed.\_

&quot;I guess they were singing for him,&quot; his father said, seeming very weary and subdued now. [00:30:00] &quot;Even when they're sad, they sound like they just about to go and tear off a piece.&quot;

He yawned and leaned across the boy and slapped his wife lightly on the shoulder, allowing his hand to rest there for a moment. &quot;Don't they?&quot;

&quot;Don't talk that way,&quot; she said. &quot;Well, that's what we're going to do,&quot; he said, &quot;you can make up your mind to that.&quot; He started whistling. &quot;You see, when I begin to feel it, I get kind of musical, too.&quot;

\_Oh, Lord, come on and ease my troubling mind.\_

He had a Black friend his age, eight, who lived nearby. His name was Otis. They wrestled together in the dark. Now, the thought of Otis made him sick. He began to shiver. His mother put his arms around him. &quot;He's tired,&quot; she said. &quot;Well, we'll be home soon,&quot; said his father.

He began to whistle again. &quot;We didn't see Otis [00:31:00] this morning,&quot; Jesse said. He did not know why he said this, his voice in the darkness of the car sounded small and accusing. &quot;You haven't seen Otis for a couple of mornings,&quot; his mother said. That was true, but he was only concerned about this morning.

&quot;No,&quot; said his father, &quot;I reckon Otis folks was afraid to let him show himself this morning.&quot; &quot;But Otis didn't do nothing!&quot; Now his voice sounds questioning. &quot;Otis can't do nothing,&quot; said his father, &quot;he's too little.&quot; The car lights picked up that wooden house, which now solemnly approached them, the lights falling around it like yellow dust.

Their dog chained to a tree began to bark. &quot;We just want to make sure Otis don't do nothing,&quot; said his father, and stopped the car. He looked down at Jesse. &quot;And you tell him what your daddy said, you hear me?&quot; &quot; Yes,&quot; he said. His father switched off the lights. The dog moaned and pranced, but they [00:32:00] ignored him and went inside.

He could not sleep. He lay awake, hearing the night sounds. The dogs yawning and moaning outside, the sowing of the crickets, the cry of the owl, the dogs barking far away, then no sounds at all, just the heavy, endless buzzing of the night. The darkness pressed on his eyelids like the scratchy blanket.

He turned, he turned again. He wanted to call his mother, but he knew his father would not like this. He was terribly afraid. Then he heard his father's voice in the other room, low, with a joke in it. But this did not help him, it frightened him more. He knew what was going to happen. He put his head under the blanket, then pushed his head out again for fear, staring at the dark window.

He heard his mother's moan, his father's sigh, he gritted his teeth, then their bed began to [00:33:00] rock. His father's breathing seemed to fill the world. That morning, before the sun had gathered all its strength, men and women, some flushed and some paled with excitement, came with news. Jesse's father seemed to know what the news was before the first jalopy stopped in the yard, and he ran out, crying, &quot;They got him, then? They got him?&quot; The first jalopy held eight people. Three men and two women and three children. The children were sitting on the laps of the grown ups. Jesse knew two of them, the two boys. They shyly and uncomfortably greeted each other. He did not know the girl. &quot;Yes, they got him,&quot; said one of the women, the older one who wore a wide hat and a fancy faded blue dress.

&quot;They found him early this morning.&quot; &quot;How far had he got?&quot; Jesse's father asked. &quot;He hadn't gotten no further than Harkness,&quot; one of the men said, &quot;Looks like he got [00:34:00] lost up there in all them trees, or maybe he just got so scared he couldn't move.&quot; They all laughed. &quot;Yes, and you know it's near a graveyard too,&quot; said the younger woman, and they laughed again.

&quot;Is that where they got him?&quot; asked Jesse's father. By this time, there were three cars piled behind the first one. With everyone looking excited and shining, and Jesse noticing that they were carrying food, it was like a Fourth of July picnic. &quot;Yeah, that's where he is,&quot; said one of the men, &quot; declare, Jesse, you going to keep us here all day long, answering your damn food questions? Come on, we ain't got no time to waste.&quot; &quot;Don't bother putting up no food,&quot; cried a woman from one of the other cars, &quot;we got enough, just come on.&quot; &quot;Why thank you,&quot; said Jesse's father, &quot;we'd be right alone then.&quot; &quot;I better get a sweater for the boy,&quot; said his mother, &quot;in case it turns cold.&quot; Jesse watched his mother's [00:35:00] thin legs across the yard.

He knew that she also wanted to comb her hair a little, and maybe put on a better dress, the dress she wore to church. His father guessed this, too, for he yelled behind her, &quot;Now, don't you go trying to turn yourself into no movie star. You just come on.&quot; But he laughed as he said this and winked at the men; his wife was younger and prettier than most of the other women. He clapped Jesse on the head and started pulling him toward the car. &quot;You all go on,&quot; he said, &quot; I'll be right behind you. Jesse, you go tie up that there dog while I get this car started.&quot; The car sputtered and coughed and shook. The caravan began to move.

Bright dust filled the air. As soon as he was tied up, the dog began to bark. Jesse's mother came out of the house carrying a jacket for his father and a sweater for Jesse. She had put a ribbon in her [00:36:00] hair and had an old shawl around her shoulders. &quot;Put these in the car, son,&quot; she said, and handed everything to him.

She bent down and stroked the dog, looked to see if there was water in his bowl, then went back up the three porch steps and closed the door. &quot;Come on,&quot; said his father, &quot; ain't nothing in there for nobody to steal.&quot; He was sitting in the car, which trembled and belched. The last car of the caravan had disappeared, but the sound of the singing floated behind them. Jesse got into the car, sitting close to his father, loving the smell of the car and the trembling and the bright day and the sense of going on a great and unexpected journey. His mother got in and closed the door and the car began to move. Not until then did he ask, &quot;Where are we going? Are we going on a picnic?&quot; He had a feeling that he knew where they were going, [00:37:00] but he was not sure. &quot;That's right,&quot; his father said. &quot;We're going on a picnic. You won't ever forget this picnic.&quot;

&quot;Are we,&quot; he asked, after a moment, &quot;going to see the bad &quot;n-word&quot;? The one that knocked down old Miss Standish?&quot; &quot;Well, I reckon,&quot; said his mother, &quot;that we might see him.&quot;

He started to ask, will a lot of &quot;n-words&quot; be there? Will Otis be there? But he did not ask his question, to which, in a strange and uncomfortable way, he already knew the answer. Their friends in the other car stretched up the road as far as he could see. Other cars had joined them. There were cars behind them.

They were singing. The sun seemed suddenly very hot, and it was, at once, very happy, and a little afraid. He did not quite understand what was happening, and he did not know what to ask. He had no one to ask. He had grown accustomed for the solution of such mysteries to go to Otis. He felt that [00:38:00] Otis knew everything, but he could not ask Otis about this.

Anyway, he had not seen Otis for two days. He had not seen a Black face anywhere for more than two days, and he now realized as they began chugging up the long hill which eventually led to Harkness, that there was no Black faces on the road this morning, no Black people anywhere. From the house in which they live all along the road, no smoke curled, no life stirred, maybe one or two chickens were to be seen.

That was all. There was no one at the windows, no one in the yard, no one sitting on the porches, and the doors were closed. He had come to this road many a time and seen women washing in the yard, and there were no clothes on the clothesline. Men working in the fields, children playing in the dust, Black men passed them on the road other mornings, other days, on foot or in wagons, sometimes in cars, tipping their hats, smiling, joking, their teeth a [00:39:00] solid white against their skin, their eyes as warm as the sun, the blackness of their skin like dull fire against the white of the blue or the gray of their torn clothes. They passed the &quot;n-word&quot; church, dead, white, desolate, locked up in the graveyard where no one felt or walked. He saw no flowers. He wanted to ask, where are they? Where are they all? But he did not dare.

As the hill grew steeper and the sun grew colder, he looked at his mother and his father. They looked straight ahead, seeming to be listening to the singing, which echoed and echoed in this graveyard silence. They were strangers to him now. They were looking at something he could not see. His father's lips had a strange, cruel curve.

He wet his lips from time to time and swallowed. He was terribly aware of his father's tongue. It was as though he had never seen it [00:40:00] before. His father's body suddenly seemed immense, bigger than a mountain, his eyes, which were gray green, looked yellow in the sunlight, or at least, there was a light in them, which he had never seen before.

His mother patted her hair and adjusted the ribbon leaning forward to look into the car mirror. &quot;You look alright,&quot; said his father and laughed. &quot;When that &quot;n-word&quot; looks at you, he's gonna swear he throwed his life away for nothing. Wouldn't be surprised if he don't come back to haunt you,&quot; and he laughed again.

The singing now slowly began to cease, and he realized that they were nearing their destination. They had reached a straight, narrow, pebbly road with trees on either side. The sunlight filtered down on them from a great height, as though they were underwater, and the branches of the trees scraped against the cars with a tearing sound.

To the right of them and beneath [00:41:00] them, invisible now, lay the town, and to the left, miles of trees which led to the high mountain range, which his ancestors had crossed in order to settle in this valley. Now, all was silent except for the bumping of the tires against the rocky road, the sputtering of motors, and the sound of a crying child, and they seemed to move more slowly. They were beginning to climb again. He watched the cars ahead as they toiled patiently upward, disappearing into the sunlight of the clearing. Presently, he felt their vehicles also rise, heard his father's changed breathing. The sunlight hit his face, the trees moved away from them, and they were there.

As their car crossed the clearing, he looked around. There seemed to be millions, there were certainly hundreds of people in the clearing, staring towards something he could not see. There was a fire. He could not see the [00:42:00] flames, but he smelled the smoke. Then they were on the other side of the clearing, among the trees again. His father drove off the road and parked the car behind the great many other cars. He looked down at Jesse. &quot;You all right?&quot; he asked. &quot;Yes, sir,&quot; he said. &quot;Well, come on then,&quot; his father said. He reached over and opened a door on his mother's side. His mother stepped out first. They followed her into the clearing.

At first he was aware, only of confusion, of his mother and father greeting and being greeted, himself being handled, hugged, and patted, and told how much he had grown. The wind blew the smoke from the fire across the clearing into his eyes and nose. He could not see over the backs of the people in front of him.

The sounds of laughing and cursing and wrath and something else rolled in waves from the front of the mob to the back. Those in front expressed their delight as what they [00:43:00] saw, and this delight rolled backwards. Wave upon wave crossed the clearing, more ac rid than the smoke. His father reached down suddenly and sat Jesse on his shoulders.

Now he saw the fire of twigs and boxes piled high, flames made pale orange and yellow, and then, as a veil under the steadier light of the sun, gray blue smoke rolled upward and poured over their heads. Beyond the shifting curtain of fire and smoke, he made out first only a length of gleaming chain attached to a great limb of the tree.

Then he saw that this chain bound two Black hands together at the wrist, dirty yellow palm facing dirty yellow palm. The smoke poured up. The hands dropped out of sight. A cry went up from the crowd. Then, the hand slowly came [00:44:00] into view again, pulled upward by the chain. This time he saw the kinky, sweaty, bloody head.

he had never before seen a head with so much hair on it, hair so Black and so tangled that it seemed like another jungle. The head was hanging. He saw the forehead, flat and high, with a kind of arrow of hair in the center, like he had, like his father had, they called it a widow's peak.

And the mangled eyebrows, the wide nose, the closed eyes, and the glittening eye lashes, and the hanging lips, all streaming with blood and sweat. His hands were straight above his head, all his weight pulled downward from his hands. He was a big man, bigger man than his father, and Black as an African jungle cat, and naked.

Jesse pulled upward, his father's hands held him firmly by the ankles. [00:45:00] He wanted to say something. He did not know what, but nothing he said could have been heard, for now the crowd roared again as the man stepped forward and put more wood on the fire. The flames leapt up. He thought he heard the hanging man scream, but he was not sure. Sweat was pouring from the hair in his armpits, poured down his sides, over his chest, into his navel, and in his groin. He was lowered again. He was raised again. Now, Jesse knew that he heard him scream. The head went back, the mouth wide open, blood bubbling from the mouth. The veins of the neck jumped out.

Jesse clung to his father's neck in terror as the cry rolled over the crowd. The cry of all the people rose to answer the dying man's cry. He wanted death to come quickly. They wanted to make death wait. And it was they who held [00:46:00] death now, on a leash, which they lengthened little by little. What did he do? Jesse wondered. What did the man do? What did he do? But he could not ask his father. He was seated on his father's shoulders, but his father was far away. There were two older men, friends of his father's, raising and lowering the chain. Everyone indiscriminately seemed to be responsible for the fire. There was no hair left on the &quot;n-word's&quot; privates, and the eyes now were wide open, as wide as the eyes of a clown or a doll.

The smoke now carried a terrible odor across the clearing. The odor of something burned, which was both sweet and rotten. He turned his head a little and saw the field of faces. He watched his mother's face. Her eyes were very bright. Her mouth was open. She was more beautiful than he had [00:47:00] ever seen her.

And more strange, he began to see a joy he had never felt before. He watched the hanging, gleaming body, the most beautiful and terrible object he had ever seen till then. One of his father's friends reached up, and in his hand he held a knife, and Jesse wished that he had been that man. It was a long, bright knife, and the sun seemed to catch it, to play with it, to caress it.

It was brighter than the fire, and a wave of laughter swept the crowd. Jesse felt his father's hands on his ankles slip and tighten. The man with the knife walked toward the crowd, smiling slightly, as though there were a signal. A silence fell. He heard his mother's cough.

Then, the man with the knife walked up to the hanging body. He turned and smiled again. Now there was a silence all over the field. The hanging head [00:48:00] looked up. It seemed fully conscious now, as though the fire had burned out tear and pain. The man with the knife took the &quot;n-words&quot; privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them, in the cradle of the one white hand.

The &quot;n-words&quot; privates seemed as remote as me, being weighed in a scale, but seemed heavier too, much heavier. And Jesse felt his scrotum tighten, and huge, huge, much bigger than his father's, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest. The white hand stretched them, cradled them, caressed them.

Then, the dying man's eyes looked straight into Jesse's eyes. It could not have been as long as a second, but it seemed longer than a year. Then Jesse screamed, and [00:49:00] the crowd screamed as the knife flashed, first up and then down, cutting the dreadful thing away, and the blood came roaring down. Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing.

Jesse's head, all of its own weight, fell downward toward his father's head. Someone stepped forward and drenched the body with kerosene. Where the man had been, a great sheet of flame appeared. Jesse's father lured him to the ground. &quot;Well, I told you,&quot; said his father, &quot;you wasn't never going to forget this picnic.&quot;

His father's face was full of sweat, his eyes were very peaceful. At that moment, Jesse loved his father more than he had ever loved him. He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed to him a great secret, which would be the key [00:50:00] to his life forever. &quot;I reckon,&quot; he said. &quot;I reckon.&quot;

Jesse's father took him by the hand and with his mother, a little behind him, talking and laughing with other women, they walked through the crowd, across the clearing, the Black body was on the ground, the chain which had held it was being rolled up by one of his father's friends. Whatever the fire had left undone, the hands and the knives and the stones of the people had accomplished. The head was caved in, one eye was torn out, one ear was hanged.

But one had to look carefully to realize this, for it was now merely a black charred object on the black charred ground. He lay, spread eagle, with what had been a wound between what had been his legs. &quot;They going to leave him there,&quot; Jesse whispered. &quot;Yeah,&quot; said his father. &quot;They'll come and get him by and [00:51:00] by. I reckon we better get over there and get some of that food before it's all gone.&quot;

&quot;I reckon&quot;, he muttered now to himself, &quot;I reckon.&quot;

Grace stirred and touched him on the thigh. The moonlight covered her like glory. Something bubbled up in him, his nature again returned to him. He thought of the boy in the cell. He thought of the man in the fire. He thought of the night and grabbed himself and stroked himself in a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl came out of him and dragged his sleeping wife up on one elbow. She stared at him in a moonlight, which had now grown cold as ice. He thought of the morning and grabbed her, laughing and crying, crying and laughing.

He whispered as he stroked her, as he took her, &quot;Come on, sugar. I'm going to do to you like an &quot;n-word&quot;, just like an &quot;n-word&quot;, come on sugar, and love me just like you love an [00:52:00] &quot;n-word&quot;.&quot; He thought of the morning as he labored, and she moaned, thought of the morning as he labored harder than he ever had before.

And before his labors had ended, he heard the first cocked crow, and the dogs began to bark, and the sound of tires on the gravel road.

Jim Phelan: Thank you, Aaron. That's quite the story.

I liked your doing the spirituals, so thanks for that.

Aaron Oforlea: I made it up, I don't know if that's what Baldwin had in his mind.

Jim Phelan: I think it was pretty effective, but you know, I've read this story several times and every time I'm just overwhelmed by it and your reading, you know, overwhelmed me too. And there's so much and we're not going to be able to, you know, do justice to this story, I'm sure. But why don't we start by thinking about, you know, sort of some of the big picture things. So, here we have Baldwin, who's a black, male, bisexual writer, [00:53:00] vocalizing through a white, male, heterosexual character. It seems like a pretty audacious thing for Baldwin to do, think about it in the 1960s, it seems like, you know, maybe risks and rewards here.

What do you think?

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah. Yes. Well, I agree with you. I mean, it's a very risky story to write at this particular time. You know, I think in writing this story, Baldwin risks alienation and a backlash for confronting American readers.

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Oforlea: With the harsh realities of racism, violence, and sexual exploitation.

And I think the gains though, you know, are enormous. The opportunity to expose the psychological toll of racial hatred, claim a space for marginalized voices, and uphold his artistic integrity by writing honestly about a taboo subject.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, okay, right, And here we are reading it, you know 60 years later and still being deeply moved by it.

So, you know, one of the things about the [00:54:00] story that's interesting to me is sort of the way he handles time and the way he handles action. You know, so if we think about, does the story have a plot? Like, well, you know, starts out, he's unable to perform, he ends up, he is able to perform in this sort of brutal, violent kind of way.

But, you know, between the beginning and the end of the, sort of, the narrative now, we have the flashbacks, right? And those flashbacks tell some pretty detailed stories. So, you know, even though, like, we'd say, all right, how much time passes in the story, if we think about where it begins and where it ends, we'd say, well, maybe an hour.

But, then we have all the details in the flashback. But also then if we think about that in terms of the, the present time of the story, Jesse doesn't really undergo any changes, right? And so, from our perspective as readers, sort of what we're getting, we're getting his [00:55:00] backstory, and there's a lot to unpack in the backstory, but it's, of like we're getting, all right, how did Jesse come to be here?

How did Jesse come to be this who he is, right? This white deputy sheriff who's inflicting violence on Black protesters. And you talked in the opening a little bit about, you know, sort of the generational aspect of it, which comes through in the flashback to the lynching, so you know, that with that preliminary, there's a bunch of questions that we can explore, I think. So, you know, Jesse, we have a character sketch here. What stands out to you about Jesse's character?

Aaron Oforlea: A couple of things. I'm struck with how deeply Jesse has internalized white supremacy and demonization.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Aaron Oforlea: Jesse embodies the ideology of white supremacy, shaped by the cultural and societal influences that are historically constructed to maintain his racial hierarchy. His racial hatred is not just an individual flaw, but is portrayed as systemic and learned, again, a [00:56:00] reflection of the broader societal pathology that has, you know, been normalized.

Jim Phelan: Right. That's sort of the way in which the lynching, you know, is a communal picnic. Yeah. So, it's not just Jesse, Jesse's located within the system. Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: He's located within the system. He's, psychological fragmented, you know. The system is so much a part of his life, even, you know, he's a, deputy, you know, it's a deputy sherriff and then as even a person selling insurance or whatever he was doing, right; in both of those roles, he still maintained the same racial hatred, right?

I mean, even, you know, sometimes folks argue like, you know, close contact. So, for example, you would imagine, you know, someone who works in a particular community would in some way gain a deeper understanding or more complex understanding of individuals within that community. But in this case, you know, in Jesse's case, that doesn't happen.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Aaron Oforlea: I think that's, again, testament to just how [00:57:00] systemic racism is and how socialized it is into an individual, into their make up, into how they see themselves and imagine themselves.

Jim Phelan: Right, and he thinks of himself as I'm doing good in the world. I'm a good person, and Baldwin I think is really sort of highlighting that contrast, right, between the hatred and the self congratulation for being a good man, right?

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. and then at the same time, Baldwin is showing us how Blackness function in Jesse's life. I mean, Blackness is just, it's a commodification, something to control, something to use, something to exploit.

Even the most intimate places in his life, which is, of course, how the novel opened in the bed with his wife, Blackness is there, right? Blackness is something that is used. It is commodified for him to get aroused.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, right. Yeah, I mean in the beginning we have like, oh he's thinking in one way, we're out of the Blackness, Oh if a [00:58:00] Black woman were here, I could yeah, you know, I could make her do something that I won't ask Grace to do and then at the end you know after he's had the memory of the lynching, somehow his sexuality is, and his masculinity, as you say, is tied to some idea of Blackness.

But it's also, you know, like this is not tender lovemaking at the end, right? It's, it's something, you know, he labored as hard as ever.

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting too, we're also told that when he uses the &quot;n-word&quot; at the end with his wife, he's saying it out loud to her. We're not told that he is thinking it at this point.

He's saying it out loud to her. So, she's complicit in this, right? Which is of course how the, in majority of time lynchings worked at that time. It was the sort of idea that, this sort of fear, black male sexuality, and I think in this situation, we can also argue that that there was this fear that white women will prefer Black masculinity, Black male [00:59:00] sexuality over white masculinity or white male sexuality.

And so, that's also what he's working out there. He's conquering that discourse as well.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, and you can think, I mean, that in a way connects to Jesse's father. Like, the night before the lynching, he's telling his wife, oh, you know, they're singing, and so they're thinking about sex, and, oh, that's what I'm thinking about, and you better, you know, we're gonna get it, you know.

So it is, yeah, that relationship between white men's idea of their sexuality and Black masculinity is threaded through the story in a big way. Yeah, so we've touched on this a little, but maybe we could expand a little bit. So how does, how do you see Baldwin kind of positioning his readers you know, in relation to Jesse, because, you know, one of the things that often happens is like what you were saying about you know, if you're in a community then you might have a deeper understanding and so on. One thing about an author sort of putting readers in [01:00:00] a position of following the internal consciousness of a character is that it creates a sort of kind of sympathy or empathy or something like that. But you know, what do you see happening with the more exposed we are to Jesse's interiority? What is Baldwin sort of, how is he guiding us to respond to it?

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah, this is a really good question because it, it dives into Baldwin's complex narrative technique and its psychological impact on the reader.

Baldwin uses a third person limited perspective that pulls readers uncomfortably close to Jesse's racist and violent mind you know, which, allows us to experience his disturbing thoughts without endorsing them.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Aaron Oforlea: This creates an unusual tension between the readers because now readers are forced into Jesse's worldview, but are simultaneously repelled from his beliefs and actions.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: Now You know, I think Baldwin's approach raises questions about empathy and complicity and the uncontrollable task of understanding [01:01:00] morally abhorrent perspectives. This narrative challenges readers to confront the psychology of white supremacy, you know, illustrating how deeply ingrained and pervasive it can be, you know, and so I think in a very real way, then Baldwin used Jesse as a lens to examine societal structures, you know, and making readers face the ugly realities of the racial violence, which, without offering a safe escape, and that is really so, skillfully done. We're not, as readers, we are not let off the hook.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Aaron Oforlea: We're like constantly pulled in deeper and deeper and deeper into Jesse's psychosis into Jesse's worldview and we're not allowed to escape at all.

You know, I mean, there isn't a single redeemable character in this narrative. And there's a, there's a victim in this narrative, whether victims in this narrative, right, even the, the women that Jesse talks about exploiting. But, you know, we're just, you know, forced to kind of sit with it, and deal with it.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. And, and [01:02:00] the detail of the lynching is really excruciating to read and to be forced to, and, going with Baldwin's technique, right, the idea of, okay, the eight year old Jesse sort of experiencing this, but that eight year old Jesse's experience is now sort of, he's re experiencing it as the adult, right?

And even at the end, like the, I reckon, right, his father, you know, I reckon he'll never forget this, and then it comes back into the present, I reckon, I reckon, he says it out loud, you know. It's there. And that, that idea of, okay, you know, the eight year old and what he was, you know, interpolated into, socialized into, has blossomed into this adult Jesse.

Yeah. And it's, really, excruciating, as I say.

Aaron Oforlea: Excruciating. Yeah. Without a doubt.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. I mean, maybe we should say a little bit more about the flashbacks. Maybe even some of the context, especially for the first one, right, [01:03:00] where, okay, Jesse's deputy sheriff and, he wants to, you know, the ostensible thing is, well, if I can get this man to act, he could, we could stop the singing and, you know, the disruption.

What's our context here?

Aaron Oforlea: Well, the flashbacks, so we have, you know, two of them, right? The flashback with the sheriff, which, you know, it provides a context for Jesse's increasingly violent antagonistic behavior toward Black people and reflects the ongoing tensions in the town.

And so, you know, Baldwin wanted to really situate us into this town, and what's a better way to situate us in this town where to sort of let readers know the type of oppression, violence and oppression that Jesse is afflicting upon Black people in this town is sanctioned by the law enforcement.

So, that's important because that lets us know that there is no place for these citizens to go, right? There's no one for them to report to. There's no one for them. [01:04:00] There's no one to protect them. And so we have to know it's not just about these individual citizens, it's not just about people in the town. It's about the system in the town. The sheriffs are just as complicit.

Jim Phelan: It's not even like that you would say state sanctioned, it's like state executed violence.

Aaron Oforlea: State executed, yes.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, right, but there's also this little business about, you know, well, we could have gone and burned all the houses if they were all located in the same place, and there's the stuff about, well, we can't trust each other. We have to depend on each other more than ever, but we can't trust each other as much as we once could. And so, there's a little sort of threat of the breakdown of some of the white power.

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah, you know, because I think, there's another part of white power that I think Baldwin wanted us to think about, which is the, preservation of it, right?

It's not just this ongoing like tornado or [01:05:00] hurricane. There's a protection part of it as well, right? It's like folks protecting themselves, protecting what they have and they exercise white power through this other way.

And so, I think, in that particular part where you, where it's like this sort of, you know, mistrust, what Baldwin has pointed out here is that, all these people are guilty. I mean, they're all guilty. But, you know, like the saying goes, there's no honor among thieves and people will try, you know, when it comes to self preservation, they will sell each other out to preserve their way of life, right? And I think in this sense, you know, this is what, their way of life is. I don't think so, it was not a fear of a white person gaining a conscious and turning them in, I think it's a the fear of losing this town and losing the order of the town.

And that is what they're concerned about, that is the anxiety.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. Right. A couple of things about that, when he remembers, you know, the man who he's torturing, [01:06:00] right, then asks him about, do you remember Julia, and that takes him back to that, when he encountered him as a young boy, and so we have an interesting, I think, contrast there between, certain ideas about masculinity and relating to Miss Julia. What do you make of that, and especially of Jesse sort of thinking about this again, on this night?

Aaron Oforlea: Well, I think one of the, one of the, the fear that, Jesse has, and I think what, you know, Baldwin is also suggesting that was a fear of Black men was that they could not, regardless of the violence that they perpetuate on Black men, on these citizens.

What they could not do is take their dignity away from them.

Jim Phelan: Okay, good.

Aaron Oforlea: And that's something that you, you know, that someone has to give. You know, if I use a sports analogy, right, you know, athletes, you know, talk about, you know when you got them, and you see, you see the change in their body posture or so forth on the court or on the field when you know you got [01:07:00] them in. That change is when they are defeated, you know, and they feel defeated. You see it in their eyes. I think for Jesse, what bothered him so much is that he could not get that reaction from them.

But even a 10 year old kid, even a 10 year old kid, I don't want nothing from you white man. You know?

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right.

Aaron Oforlea: And he's, and you know, and on some level he's thinking, you know, don't you see how we beat every Black man this town, we kill you guys and you don't have any, you don't have any fear.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: 10 year old boy said there's no Miss Julia live here, right. You know, there's sort of these places throughout the text where, we are constantly reminded of that, what bothers Jesse the most is that he cannot, he does not see the defeatism that he expects, right?

That these Black people in this town continue to exist. They continue to thrive. They continue to live.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right.

Aaron Oforlea: And they got the nerve to broadcast the violence and bring in people from the North and bring in kids and stuff like that, you know, like who are they to, to, [01:08:00] to do this nice father stuff again.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. And then we sort of maybe jump to the second flashback and do a little bit more with that. You know, we get the detail about eight year old Jesse having a Black friend, Otis.

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Right, who, I mean, it's Otis that, you know, Jesse goes to whenever he wants to find out something he doesn't know, you know, but uh, now this time, you know, he hasn't seen Otis for two days, before the lynching, so you know, why, what's Baldwin doing with sort of, the friendship, the nature of the friendship.

Aaron Oforlea: Well, you know, I think, Jesse is confused. You know, I think in that situation when, when, when Jesse's young, you know, he's confused. I mean, he's not really part of this white male, world yet.

And neither is Otis, which is why the father says, well, Otis can't do anything now. So we're not, we're not really worried about Otis.

You know, they're, kind of like existing in this world, but they're not part of this world. Now I would imagine that Otis is more so a part of this Black role and he [01:09:00] understand his Black world in, Jesse understands the white world. And the reason why I would make that argument, because I think for Otis, it'd be about survival.

His parents, have to teach on a very young age how to survive in this world where Jesse doesn't have that fear, right. I mean, that's not something for him. He doesn't have to learn how to negotiate or navigate this Black world.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Aaron Oforlea: But Otis has to know how to negotiate this white world, particularly if he goes over and plays with Jesse.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: And so, I think that's kind of what is, you know, going on there is that Jesse doesn't quite understand everything. I mean, he has a, he somewhat does, but he does not. But, but then also that's important though too, because, what Baldwin wants us also to know, which is I believe essential to the story, is that all this behavior is learned.

But not only is it learned, more so for Baldwin, it's deeply socialized into individuals. And so that's why it's important that we know that Jesse has this Black friend who, you know, named Otis, who he plays with, because [01:10:00] we also understand that as, which we do know, right, Jesse becomes racist white man as he grows up.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right. There's a possibility, if he weren't being socialized so strongly in that way that he and Otis could have become lifelong friends, but we know that's not, that's not the way it works. That's not, that's not going to happen, yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: That's not going to happen.

And it's, we also understand, you know, I think Baldwin's point is that it's like deeply socialized, you know, it's like ingrained in them to the point to where it's not as simple as like, you know, and particularly once they get to where Jesse is and his father's, once you get, once you get that far to where you can go and enjoy a lynching, right, you can call it a picnic.

Once you get to that point, you are far gone.

Jim Phelan: Right, right, right.

Aaron Oforlea: You're far gone. Not to be turned off or to even flinch to watch a man slice the testicles off of another man.

Jim Phelan: Absolutely. Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: You know, I mean, when we, now when we talk about that type of behavior, we talk about, you know, I think like, you know, Jeffrey Dahmer.

Yeah. Like we, you know, [01:11:00] classify these people as being, you know, seriously, cognitively flawed.

Jim Phelan: Right, right, sociopaths.

Aaron Oforlea: Indeficient. Right. Just sociopaths. Yes. Right. Yes. Right.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: And so, in a sense.

Jim Phelan: But this is normalized there, right? This is normalized. This is our community picnic.

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah. And so maybe Baldwin is telling us that the South was at one time comprised of a number of sociopaths.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Or they're, yeah, equating that, that racism with, you know, being a pathology. Yeah. Yeah. What do you make of the title? So, \_Going to Meet the Man. \_

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah, I think about the title in a couple ways, right? I think about the man can be seen as like, a representation of, oppressive whites, our structure, you know, Jesse, the main character, white sheriff deputy embodies this power, exerting this it over African American individuals through violence and intimidation, you know, so the title may therefore, you know, point to the, to the inevitability of [01:12:00] confronting the brutal reality of white supremacy and how it shapes identity and interactions, trust in society, et cetera. A double meaning for me, you know, on one hand, it could imply that Jesse, despite his role as a white authority figure, must ultimately meet or confront white supremacy, the pathological, the moral costs of racism. Meeting could also represent an encounter with the grotesque, you know, the reality of racial.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. What about the idea that if we think about this, if you know, the force of the second flashback, and then the idea of the, the meeting of the, locking of the eyes.

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: This is Jesse, Jesse meets a man, right? I mean, we don't, we, again, we don't, he's not character other than, you know, as the victim, really. I mean, but the strong man and, you know, a certain kind of masculinity there and the threat of masculinity, he has to be castrated and so on. I'm not [01:13:00] saying that this is the thing, but maybe just another one to add to the list.

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah.

Or Jesse meets the man that he can never conquer.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, right.

Aaron Oforlea: I thought a lot about where they, you know, lock eyes.

And again, it's that same sort of determination, that resiliency that I was talking about earlier in Black men and Jesse even jumped to kind of, you know, when he saw that he was startled to see this man still have something in him, right?

And so, you know, maybe Jesse meets a man, right? Jesse meets the man that he could never come, right?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Aaron Oforlea: And that is what, of course, how the story opens. That is what drives Jesse crazy, because as these people still are singing and these people are still talking back and these people are still fighting for their lives, right?

Jim Phelan: Right. And then we have the end, the end of the story, right? He's got, the next morning is coming, he's going to start the day over again, right? Okay, well, you know, with, this is a longer story than we usually have, but I think it's very much worth the time,

but it does mean maybe [01:14:00] our discussion won't go as long, because we don't want the podcast to go too long for our listeners.

Aaron Oforlea: Sure.

Jim Phelan: But before we end, is there anything you'd like to say that we haven't really, say about the story that we haven't touched on?

Aaron Oforlea: Yeah, you know, just to say a couple of things about the spirituals, Baldwin's use of the spirituals, you know, I think, you know, as I, you know, as I said in, most, you know, scholars argue, this is that the spirituals represent the enduring resilience of African American people is, you know, a source of strength that transcends physical violence, right?

These songs are rooted in the history of slavery and African American struggle and freedom, and they really speak to the unyielding spirit of community and communal solidarity, you know.

Jim Phelan: And that's why they gotta stop it.

Aaron Oforlea: That's why they gotta stop it, yeah.

Jim Phelan: If you're Jesse, yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: Well, yeah, because if you're Jesse, you know, because you feel powerless.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: Right? Because even if Jesse says, Well, I think there's a God, I think their God is the same as our God. I'm not sure if their heaven is the same as our heaven, right? But it renders him powerless, [01:15:00] because he doesn't know how to go about they're thinking about or engaging, the spirituals, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: It's a dual implication for them. You know, on one hand, they are hopeful songs of redemption for African American individuals, and then the other hand, they serve as a reminder of judgment. And remember, he talks about , she says, maybe they're singing us to hell.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Aaron Oforlea: You know? Yeah. She says, if we think we're singing for our salvation, maybe they're singing us to hell. He feels so tortured by the spirituals, you know, and it makes sense that he would feel tortured by the spirituals because again, remember we just, he opens it with, I'm a good man, God, all that is connected to his Christian upbringing.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Aaron Oforlea: But here he is like this terrible human being who believes he's doing a service.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, exactly. Okay. Well, maybe that's a good note to end on. Again, this story, there's so much more that we could do with it, but I'm really glad that you chose it and, and read it so well.

So thank you very much, Aaron.

Aaron Oforlea: [01:16:00] Thank you for having me.

Jim Phelan: Sure. And I want to thank our listeners and say, we appreciate your feedback, which you can send to us at email address projectnarrative@osu.edu or on our Facebook page or our Twitter account, which is @PNOhioState. I'd also like to remind you that you can find more than 30 other episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts.

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