

JAMES BALDWIN AND RICHARD WRIGHT: DIVERGENCE AND CONFLUENCE

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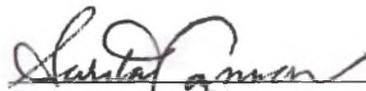
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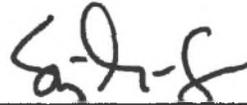
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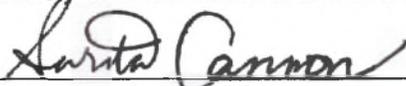
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JAMES BALDWIN AND RICHARD WRIGHT: DIVERSION AND CONFLUENCE

Miriam deQuadros
San Francisco, California
2019

When going through the portal of photography, James Baldwin and Richard Wright find similar themes in American racial politics despite situating themselves differently in their photo-texts. Baldwin's *Nothing Personal* (1964) and Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) argue for the potential power of human connection in achieving American racial equality. Wright directly grounds his texts in the U.S. Farm Services Administration funded photographs, while Baldwin uses Richard Avedon's portraits as backdrops for a text in which he questions the myths underscoring the pictures' American hegemony. Both approaches reflect the differing states of race relations at the time of the texts' creation; however, both authors consistently find that the path forward for white Americans and African-Americans is to see and accept the shared history that built the nation but segregated its people. Finding moments when both sets of texts and photographs engage in joint arguments against discrimination only strengthens the plea for equality in *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

8/7/2019
Date

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INTRODUCTION

*In the history of photography that has concerned itself with Africa and its diaspora, the concept of the portal has been central. In a newspaper, say, a photograph of a black subject is usually conceived as a window onto another world. Even the most well-meaning journalistic images of black life have the intention of enabling a passage, from the First World to the Third, for example, or one side of the railway tracks to the other. --
Zadie Smith*

As Zadie Smith details in a 2018 *New Yorker* article regarding contemporary photographer Deana Lawson, photographs of African-Americans can function as a portal that brings viewers into “another world.” Photography opens doors between races and classes that might otherwise be overlooked. Viewers notice minute details of expression, dress, and environment that can inform attitudes and understandings of a hitherto unseen life. Photographs allow a gathering of information that might be considered intrusive in real life, as viewers can boldly stare at photographs of those across the railway tracks and become affected by the emotions and realities that the images convey. But what happens when two celebrated African-American authors enter the portal of photography?

Both James Baldwin (1924-1987) and Richard Wright (1908-1960) wrote texts to accompany books of photographs; however, while decades of articles detail these men’s careers in relationship to each other, current scholarship reveals a lack of comparative analysis regarding their photo-texts¹. In this essay, I will argue that considering Wright’s and Baldwin’s photo-texts together reveals their shared concerns alongside a constant call

¹ Countless articles are available on Wright and Baldwin’s issues, but two good sources for an overview are the *James Baldwin Now* essay, “‘Alas poor Richard!’ Transatlantic Baldwin, the Politics of Forgetting, and the Project of Modernity” by Michelle M. Wright and James Campbell’s *Talking at the Gates*, particularly Chapter 6.

for American racial equality. Wright and Baldwin both employed the genre of photo-text to fight racial discrimination and to encourage whites to see African-Americans as an equal part of the American social fabric. But examining these works together also reveals fundamental differences between the two works despite the shared genre of photo-text. Some of these divergences stem from the passage of time and the subsequent changes in political landscape between the 1940's and 1960's, while others more directly relate to how Wright and Baldwin situate themselves in their texts. Baldwin's and Wright's distinctly different use of pronouns in *Nothing Personal* and *12 Million Black Voices* reflects their own personal states at the particular points of time in which the texts were written. Baldwin's and Wright's essays also have different relationships with their respective visual elements and require different modes of engagement by readers. Texts can inform how photographs are seen but photographs can inform how texts are read, and this relationship between the visual and the verbal should be examined to better understand photo-texts. Wright pushes readers to view the African-Americans in the photographs as equal humans deserving of just economic and social opportunities, while Baldwin wants readers to critically view the photographs as well as themselves in an effort to dispel American myths and create a society based on honesty. Ultimately, however, the fruitful ground of shared connections offers a way to encourage confluence, rather than dissonance, when reading these two great authors.

Baldwin's *Nothing Personal* (1964) and Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) are worth examining jointly to consider how the medium of photo-text creates a bridge between Wright's and Baldwin's approaches to literature. This photographic portal infuses depth and adds colors to their essays in ways that join Wright's more typically

instructive tone which, perhaps unfairly, gave him a reputation as being “primarily a writer of power...and not so much a writer of craft and skill” with Baldwin’s career-long thematic emphasis on “the urgent necessity of love” (Moore 140, Leeming 100). *Nothing Personal* and *12 Million Black Voices* share an empathetic regard for the individuality of each person photographed while calling for an end to governmental and societal discrimination against African-Americans. The inescapable need for love and connection coexists with a political call to action in Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices* and Baldwin’s *Nothing Personal*. In these photo-texts, Wright’s and Baldwin’s shared purpose is the shattering of American racial myths through lyrical language that contains a relentlessly rhythmic plea for equality.

This expressive call to action remains a common thread, but differences do exist in how the texts and the photographs intersect in Wright’s and Baldwin’s photo-texts. Wright’s text works to illustrate the photographs through descriptive language that functions almost as poetry. In fact, *12 Million Black Voices* is always published with its photographs, as without them the text would be difficult to comprehend. Wright’s sentence fragments and repetitive phrases that appear to caption the photographs can hardly be untangled from the visuals. But Baldwin, working with a stream of consciousness technique that reflects both his unsettled thoughts and the confused state of 1960’s race relations, produced a text that functions with and without the *Nothing Personal* photographs. Baldwin’s *Nothing Personal* essay is anthologized without its respective photographs and can be read without them, yet the power of the photographs is increased when challenged with Baldwin’s words. The issue of whether Baldwin’s and Wright’s texts are contingent upon the photographs or the photographs are contingent

upon the texts will be more fully examined later in this article, but for now, awareness of some of the complexities inherent in the photo-text genre will suffice. The combination of the written word and photographs was an established tool for social change by the time that Baldwin and Wright published their contributions, yet they were both able to push the genre in new directions.

12 Million Black Voices and *Nothing Personal* are on the continuum of social reform photo-texts that begins in 1890 with Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis's groundbreaking work combines photographs of New York City tenement dwellers with text that calls readers to action with journalistic statistics and facts. Riis's photographs "overpower the dry, factual, scientific tone of his words" but the combination of the two make it a "spectacularly effective piece of reportage" that helped shift public sentiment about the need to improve lives of the poor (Miller, "A Striking Addiction" 156, 157). Other photo-texts that are considered forerunners to *Twelve Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal* are 1937's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, by writer Erskine Caldwell and photographer Margaret Bourke-White, and 1941's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans, both of which portrayed harsh living conditions of the rural poor as a means to enlighten wealthier Americans and impact public policy. Photo-texts often attempt to show a truth that might not be conveyed solely in words or in photographs; however, the genre does have pitfalls. Clive Scott in *The Spoken Image* notes that "documentary photography is always in some sense 'victim photography'... it can provoke only a charitable response, because...it reinforces a status quo" (78). A danger exists when codifying or formalizing social structures to label some groups as victims and other groups as benefactors. The most successful photo-texts seek

to subvert, rather than reinforce, the social stereotypes and myths that can be inherent in portraying those across the railroad tracks.

The rare articles that examine *Twelve Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal* together situate the works on the temporal line that starts with Riis, but do not push comparison between the two much further. Particularly noteworthy are two essays by Joshua Miller that focus on Baldwin and *Nothing Personal*. In 1999's "The Discovery of What it Means to be a Witness: James Baldwin's Dialectics of Distance," Miller investigates how Baldwin "creates a dialectic of distance through the figure of the active witness, a mobile observer and commentator on the workings of U.S. society" (333). Miller chooses to specifically frame the time period of Baldwin's shift from passive observer to active witness as "from the period after Wright's death" (333). Baldwin and Wright are thus solely connected on a timeline that makes Wright's death a key influence on why Baldwin expanded his role as writer to include activism. Miller does not consider other possible connections between *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*. In 2000's "'A Striking Addiction to Irreality': *Nothing Personal* and the Legacy of Image-Text Collaborations," Miller again draws a temporal relationship between the two photo-texts, arguing that Baldwin and Avedon "allow (and even encourage) readers to construct their own meanings from the conjecture they offer up," rather than providing, as its antecedent *12 Million Black Voices* does, "a single, undivided purpose for both the images and the text" (182). Yes, Wright's work came decades before Baldwin's, but there is room for more detailed comparisons beyond Wright having paved the way for Baldwin's later innovations in the photo-text genre. Other studies have also examined the two photo-texts in a similarly discrete fashion. For example, in Sara Blair's 2007 book,

Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century, separate chapters are devoted to *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*, yet Blair does not bring the works into conversation with each other. Instead, Blair places emphasis on how the works fit into a timeline of similar photo-texts (Blair 165). While this evolutionary approach serves to deepen understandings of how *12 Million Black Voices* influenced *Nothing Personal* and their place in the genre of photo-texts, much can be gained by using a more synthesized analysis. Reading Baldwin's and Wright's photo-texts together causes portals to open between the two that transcend time periods and allow themes and concerns to gain importance about the ways in which African-Americans are either unseen or willfully misunderstood by whites. While most of these men's work is not illustrated, *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal* offer a unique opportunity to parse Baldwin's and Wright's texts using their visual inspiration.

The interpretation of photographs can simplify yet also magnify complex social issues. The human impacts of institutionalized racism might be overlooked or explained away when solely presented as statistics, but images can be tools for achieving deep emotional resonance with viewers. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Farm Service Administration (FSA) shocked Americans into understanding the distressing effects of the Great Depression on poor whites and African-Americans by commissioning 175,000 documentary photographs, some of which ultimately became the images in *12 Million Black Voices*. In a testimony to the power of photography to affect its viewers, the FSA specifically employed photographers so that Americans might be moved to support new social services through witnessing a sharecropper's shack or children dressed in rags. Similarly, Richard Avedon's photographic juxtapositions in *Nothing Personal* give

viewers not only a look at American society in the early 1960s, but also a pictorial commentary on how those considered “abnormal” are not so different from hegemonic ideals of “normalcy.” Viewers’ minds and hearts can be changed by a journey through photographic portals to marginalized people and their environments. Wright and Baldwin certainly appreciated the empathetic influence of visual stimuli when incorporating photographs into *Nothing Personal* and *12 Million Black Voices*. By returning again and again to the theme of human connection in these texts, Wright and Baldwin reflect a deep emotional engagement with the lives of those pictured and a belief that the American racial divide can be best healed through reciprocal relationships between its people.

In this essay, I provide critical, historical, and biographical context for *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal* before delving into how the works diverge and converge stylistically and thematically. Major divergences include stylistic differences such as pronoun choices but also thematic differences that result from how the texts interact with photographs and the political climates of the time periods in which the texts were written. Wright’s and Baldwin’s photo-texts converge thematically in their examinations of racial politics through the arenas of literacy, sexuality, history, and power, but I find that their greatest convergence is in their photo-texts’ conclusive appeals for human connection to end American racial injustice. I place primary importance on *12 Million Black Voices*’s and *Nothing Personal*’s connections because moments when the four photographic and textual forces pull together create momentum for Wright’s and Baldwin’s own arguments that “the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us” and that if Americans do not pull together, “the sea engulfs us and

the light goes out” (12MBV 146, NP 706)². Wright and Baldwin find that white Americans’ ignorance of the African-American contribution to the prosperity and success of the United States is a foundational justification for discriminatory laws and customs. Both of these authors seek to correct this ignorance by underscoring the interdependence of whites and African-Americans historically and as well as in modern society. Connections, not divisions, strengthen *12 Million Black Voices*’s and *Nothing Personal*’s themes and, more importantly, connections have the potential to ultimately heal the racial divisions in American society.

² In this article I cite Baldwin’s “Nothing Personal” essay as it appears in his *Collected Essays*, rather than the unpaginated version in *Nothing Personal*.

12 MILLION BLACK VOICES

12 Million Black Voices was critically well received when published in 1941. Arnold Green, in *Rural Sociology*, wrote that Wright “personalizes an entire people...in superb, exciting lyrical prose he becomes the indignant spokesman for his people” (Green 101). *Social Forces* found it had “moving poetic prose which frequently reaches heights of lyrical beauty” (Johnson 511). But in keeping with Wright’s affiliation with the Communist Party in Chicago, reviews also noticed how *12 Million Black Voices* “is implicitly written within a Marxian frame of reference, insofar as negro-white relations are interpreted solely in terms of conscious, deliberate exploitation of the Negro by Southern capitalists...and Northern capitalists” and “it frankly turns its back on race and portrays the plight and progress of the Negro masses as a phase of class struggle” (Green 101, Johnson 511). Horace Cayton, who is thanked in the forward to *Twelve Million Black Voices* by Wright for “his immense files of materials on urban life among Negroes, and, above all, the advice and guidance which made sections of this book possible,” wrote an impassioned review that focused on how Wright gave voice to Cayton’s and his research associates’ “study of the habitat, the milieu, the social matrix from which warped social personalities such as Bigger Thomas arise” (12MBV 6, Cayton 26-27). In *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Cayton finds that Wright provides the context for the society that produced Bigger Thomas, the violent protagonist of Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son*. Cayton is thrilled with Wright’s photo-text, as “for years my associates and I have tried to describe it by figures, maps and graphs. Now, Wright and Roskam have

told the story as it has never been told before” (Cayton 27). *12 Million Black Voices* indeed gave voice and context to dry social science statistics.

To do so, Wright repeatedly uses vivid imagery in *Twelve Million Black Voices* as he illustrates exterior and interior worlds. Wright’s description of the beginning of the Great Northern Migration finds that “Just as a kitten stretches and yawns after a long sleep, so thousands of us tramped from place to place” (12MBV 36). The use of this metaphor diffuses any sensations of threat white Americans might associate with those traveling north -- this was no invasion, but an awakening of a people who were in the nascent stages of freedom and were enjoying being able to more freely move their bodies. But Wright also uses direct language as when he ends *12 Million Black Voices* with a call to all Americans:

We are one with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each
new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us.
Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them.
(12MBV 147)

Wright includes the reader as a participant in the now, when laws and mindsets are poised to be changed. Wright displays optimism by ending with this “new tide” but also leaves readers with the mandate: “we shall be with them” (12MBV 147). Wright has brought Americans together and compels them to become active agents, rather than readers and viewers. But where does this shift to positive change in the present come from after almost 150 pages of historical institutionalized racism and poverty? The answer might lie in both the American political climate and the state of Wright’s personal life in 1941. In July 1941, “Roosevelt had signed an executive order banning racial discrimination in

defense employment,” which might seem a small step toward equality; however, “it was the first executive order on race relations to come from a president since the Emancipation Proclamation” (Rowley 253, 253-254). Change was beginning to seem possible.

Furthermore, after a period of rocky relationships, Wright was finally happily married to Ellen Poplowitz and “their happiness was obvious to others” (Rowley 258). As difficult as the journey to Chicago and the South was, Wright was in a positive frame of mind about both his personal life and the potential he saw in governmental changes. “Men are moving!” he exclaims as he ends his encompassing essay in a energetic rally cry that leaves readers with a vision of American progress through communal action, rather than a brutal and divided America (12MBV 147). Unfortunately, within weeks the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and “protest literature was a thing of the past. The photographic section of the FSA -- the department responsible for the marvelous photographs in *12 Million Black Voices* -- was transferred to the Office of War Information, where photographers were exhorted to boost American spirits,” not educate them about racial inequality (Rowley 260). The quest for equality took a backseat to the United States entering World War II and the conditions that made *12 Million Black Voices* possible ended.

But this knowledge does not lessen the joyful conclusion. Hope exists despite desperation, as it does in the final photo in *12 Million Black Voices* taken by Carl Mydans, which shows an African American man in his backyard gazing up at the sun in quiet enjoyment with a sleeping dog at his feet. While his surroundings and clothing are modest, both are livable and humane, and his positive expression seems to embody

Wright's closing vision of "the new tide" (147). Critic Mehdi Ghasemi complicates this simplistic hope because Wright's "concluding reliance on the discourse of promise obviates the need for radical social change" (146). Ghasemi suggests that Wright is accepting white constructs rather than creating a new and inclusive vision. Wright's propagation of the American Dream may or may not ultimately apply to African-Americans, despite his vibrant text. Only time would tell.

NOTHING PERSONAL

Frustratingly, over a generation later “the new tide” in America is indeed still struggling for civil rights (12MBV 147). By the 1960s, James Baldwin became personally engaged in American racial politics rather than remaining at a remove in France, as voting rights, access to jobs and education, and physical safety remained basic civil rights that eluded African-Americans. Baldwin, like Wright, bore the weight of centuries of servitude and disenfranchisement and, like Wright, Baldwin’s family history encapsulated the early twentieth-century trajectory of African-Americans in the United States. Baldwin’s step-grandmother, who lived with his family until she died when he was seven years old, was a former slave who bore her white master’s son among other children (Campbell 5). Baldwin’s step-father, who raised him and whom he believed to be his father, was born during the Civil War and grew up in the South during the bitter period of Reconstruction (Campbell 4). Baldwin’s teenaged mother journeyed to the North as part of the First Great Migration, and the better life she sought was manifested in the primary and secondary education her children received; however, college education was still fiscally out of reach (Campbell 23). Baldwin, unable to afford to continue his education after high school, found himself stuck in menial jobs. But a chance meeting with Wright, already a celebrated author, gave the young writer, “20 years old, poor, nervous, and frightened,” a champion who encouraged his literary career as well as his move to Paris (Leeming 49). Baldwin embraced life in Paris where he could escape American racial prejudices, but in later decades he bore a responsibility to at first witness

and then to actively help the American Civil Rights Movement. Baldwin could no longer be at a physical and emotional distance from the country of his birth.

Baldwin traveled on New Year's Day of 1963 for "a whirlwind lecture tour of the South" for the Congress of Racial Equality where "he was appalled and frightened by the power of the South's myths and the overtness of the hatred" (Leeming 216). "Resistance to desegregation had entered a new, more violent phase" and Baldwin could no longer be a politically removed ex-patriot (Leeming 217). As 1963 wore on, Baldwin was repeatedly shocked into action by how "the Kennedy administration still used few of the powers available to it to stop the rioting and support the just demands of the blacks"; the March on Washington led by his friend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the murder of his friend, Medgar Evers; the murder of children in a Birmingham church that Baldwin "had visited earlier in the year"; his visit to Selma for a voter registration drive, which was "Baldwin's most direct participation" in the Civil Rights Movement's "street work;" and finally the murder of President John F. Kennedy (Leeming 220, 228). It is no wonder, after this intense and violent calendar year, that "Baldwin's voice became more strident" (Leeming 219). As James Campbell writes, "Nineteen sixty-three was the year [Baldwin's] voice broke; and it affected every element of his literary style – his rhythm, his syntax, his vocabulary" (181). Baldwin's writing style evolved through his frustration with Americans who, as he later wrote, are "impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and...incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world" ("The White Man's Guilt" 723). Photographs are one way to make people see truths they refuse to acknowledge. In the course of trying to make Americans to see themselves, Baldwin and

former DeWitt Clinton High School classmate Richard Avedon created *Nothing Personal*, “the most original photo-text project of the century” (Blair 165).

1960’s American pop culture shaped the creation of the images in *Nothing Personal*. Fashion and celebrity photographer Avedon had been regularly published in books and magazines since the mid-1940s, and his signature style of photographing subjects in black and white in front of a white backdrop is employed often in *Nothing Personal*. While his artistic eye created and cropped the photographs, the documentary aspect of his work is reflected in how he allowed his subjects to represent themselves. Avedon, in his essay “Borrowed Dogs,” writes that when he was a child, his family regularly borrowed cars, houses, and dogs for their family photographs, and in one banner year’s photo album, almost a dozen dogs were thus used. Avedon explains “all of the photographs in our family album were built on some kind of lie about who we were, and revealed a truth about who we wanted to be” (Avedon, *Portraits*). Similarly, Avedon allows his subjects to present themselves as they wish to the camera, to show their evident pride in being photographed by the famed Avedon and perhaps to show their own “borrowed dogs,” or external artifices that reveal some inner truths. These formal studio portraits do not typically offer glimpses of the subjects’ environments; instead, viewers parse the sharp images for clues to the subjects’ character through faces, bodies, clothes, and expressions.

While more stylized and less documentary in nature than the FSA photographs of *12 Million Black Voices*, to Avedon, “style has always been understood as political expression and the will to style but a reflection of the will to power” (Kozloff 92). Power dynamics and politics are expressed through Avedon’s photographs in *Nothing Personal*.

Portraits of political luminaries such as President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Representative to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson “capture familiar faces from unexpected angles and distances” and thus Avedon allows viewers to know these icons in a different and, perhaps, more truthful way (Miller, “A Striking Addiction 177). Avedon remarked later that the book’s focus is “despair, dishonesty, the...things that keep people from knowing each other” (Leeming 227). Baldwin’s and Avedon’s “collaboration evokes a desire to cross lines of difference, but not erase them” to “create unsettled readers, unsure of where they fit into the American collage” (Norman 137, 138). Identity myths must be shattered so that “a nation devoured by inner sickness” could be remade. Baldwin rose to the challenge in *Nothing Personal*, as “it forms, with the remarkable photographs, a meditation on the Baldwin gospel” and is “at once a eulogy for Medgar Evers, a love song to Lucien [Happersberger, Baldwin’s intimate friend], and a celebration of his love for his family” (Leeming 230, 227). In *Nothing Personal*, Baldwin brings to bear the cadences of his past experience as a boy preacher, his explosive anger at the assassination of Evers, and his own perpetual need for love, both familial and romantic.

However, critics of the time were not complimentary toward *Nothing Personal*. A scathing review by Robert Brustein in *The New York Review of Books* calls Baldwin and Avedon “show-biz moralists” who “attempt to capitalize commercially on an increasingly self-critical national atmosphere” (10). Brustein finds that Baldwin’s text is “like a punchy and pugnacious drunk awakening from a boozy doze during a stag movie, to introduce his garrulous, irrelevant, and by now predictable comments on how to live, how to love, and how to build Jerusalem” (10). Notwithstanding Brustein’s evident desire not

to be interrupted during “stag movies,” years did pass before Baldwin’s unmoored text was appreciated and understood for how it was “meant to confound” (Norman 137). *Nothing Personal* features “rapid shifts of subject (in both image and text) and sudden juxtapositions” that demands readers “construct their own meanings from the conjecture they offer up”(Miller, “A Striking Addiction” 173, 182). However, in 1963, Brustein cannot get past how Baldwin’s text has “a highly uncertain critical identity” and how Avedon’s photos display a “hideously jaundiced eye” (10). Even in 1987, Max Kozloff wrote a review for *Art in America* that found *Nothing Personal* was James Baldwin “at his most self-indulgently alienated and bitter” while Avedon fared slightly better, and was given the benefit that his photos reflect “what he [Avedon] hopes is social insight and artistic depth” (93, 92). *Nothing Personal* still troubles critics today as shown by Caryl Phillips’s 2017 article in *Ariel*, “Nothing Personal: James Baldwin, Richard Avedon, and the Pursuit of Celebrity.” Phillips uses *Nothing Personal* to prove her thesis that “in nearly every case in which authors have allowed themselves to stoop to celebrity there has been a concomitant falling off in the quality of their literary work” (26). Of course, as previously detailed in this article, Baldwin’s status as “a man who was continually invited to mount the platform” can be more favorably viewed through the lens of 1963 and his increasing engagement with and commitment to the Civil Rights Movement, rather than a personal thirst for celebrity (Phillips 18). Baldwin’s lack of engagement with celebrity culture is also evident because he himself is not pictured at all in *Nothing Personal*, and “given his notoriety...the omission is striking” (Blair 193). That year the American public saw photographs of Baldwin representing the Civil Rights Movement on the cover of *Time* magazine and in a *Life* magazine feature, yet no Baldwin

photographs exist in *Nothing Personal* (Blair 193-194). Instead, Baldwin is only physically imaged in his text, which opens with a passage describing him lying in bed, watching television and ruminating on the fallacy of American myths.

Nothing Personal is pictorially divided into three parts: Americans, notorious, celebrated, and anonymous; mental health patients; and Americans at leisure on the beach. While later pages contain juxtaposing portraits of those working for and against equality, such as Malcolm X and George Wallace, the opening pages of *Nothing Personal* offer a series of wedding photographs taken at City Hall in New York City that reflect the potential of the Civil Rights Movement. The photos show happy couples as well as their family and friends, all beaming and holding each other. The couples pictured are primarily white; however, an African American couple's picture forms the center of the collage of photographs. Avedon and Baldwin choose to start off *Nothing Personal* with images of love in a way that presents African-Americans no differently from white Americans. While wedding imagery and rituals might seem trite, these photographs bring the viewer into a warm community of lovers who are anything but commercial images of perfect and silent brides accompanied by strongly symmetrical grooms. The beaming couples are of all ages, ethnicities, and classes. This community is America, individual, diverse and unique, and African-Americans are present as yet another iteration of love. But what of Baldwin's text? Surprisingly, he goes in an opposite direction. Instead of seeing the positive effects of love on individuals, he pulls back and finds only an absence of love in the greater society. Baldwin writes:

I know that I am now expected to make a bow in the direction of those millions of unremarked, happy marriages all over America, but I am

unable honestly to do so because I find nothing whatever in our moral and social climate -- and I am now thinking particularly of the state of our children -- to bear witness to their existence. (NP 699)

Here Baldwin takes a cue from Wright by considering large social issues in America rather than focusing on individuals. How can marriages be authentically happy when the society that condones them is itself diseased and corrupted by racism and the children of these marriages are raised on lies? Morality does not end with individuals -- it must extend to the greater American society or else the individuals become irrelevant. This statement represents quite an evolution from an author who could previously find love even in a freezing landscape as when he wrote how a character in one of his novels "felt myself flow toward [my lover], as a river rushes when the ice breaks up" (*Giovanni's Room* 83). In 1963, when faced with images of happy weddings, Baldwin casts a cynical eye and is unmoved by love.

Yet Baldwin memorably returns to love in the final lines of *Nothing Personal*:

The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out. (NP 706)

Baldwin warns that it will be the end of humanity if we stop loving one another. This bodily image of people holding one another makes the concept of love weighty and concrete. The reader cannot help but feel that Baldwin's definition of love is not an abstract and impersonal ideal, but a very real and corporal gesture. Hold each other, Baldwin says, for there we will be able to fend off the darkness of despair. Similarly, many of the images in *Nothing Personal* show people holding each other, from newly

married couples to families. While earlier in his text Baldwin finds that lies are inherent in the mythology that underscores American society and asks readers to critically engage with the photographs to find a more truthful way forward, by the end of *Nothing Personal* he finds a parallel between Avedon's images and the importance of human connection. The last section of photographs places strong value on the importance of connections as even in the mental asylum a set of patients holds hands. Love and connection exist even with despair. Continuing this theme, the final section of *Nothing Personal* features a fuzzy set of photos taken at the beach of families laughing and playing. Adults, children, a pregnant young mother and her proud husband -- these images show unguarded Americans enjoying themselves together. While the photos were taken at segregated beaches in Los Angeles, Avedon chose to not make race the focus as the photographs lack the clarity necessary to parse skin colors; instead, the out of focus images are of uncategorizable humans. But the people at the beach show love in their body language as hands hold hands and children are lifted up. This section contains no images of solitary figures; rather, Avedon shows images of people interacting happy *together*.

The final photograph in *Nothing Personal* also depicts a group of people, but in this instance, it is a group marching together -- the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The students face the camera with open and beseeching looks, as if to say to viewers: now that you have seen this broad range of photos of American individuals and life, you must support racial equality for all individuals. Their gaze commands readers, as does Baldwin, to not break faith with humanity. This photo also functions as a pictorial representation of Wright's ending to *12 Million Black Voices*: "the new tide" (12MBV

147). *Nothing Personal* ends, as does Wright's photo-text, with a call for readers to take action and join the movement for racial equality.

DIVERGENCE AND CONFLUENCE

Baldwin's and Wright's photo-texts are inextricably linked by a number of factors. A shared heritage in a genre begun by Riis's social commentary that blended together words and images, the attempts to shatter American racial myths, and that the earlier *12 Million Black Voices* paved the way for the innovations of *Nothing Personal* are some factors previously reviewed in this article. Fundamental differences between the two works have also been detailed, mainly in relation to the political and social climates of the 1940s versus the 1960s. In this section, I will detail deeper divergences between the two works, particularly how the texts interact with their respective photographs, how Baldwin and Wright position themselves in their texts, and what purpose was ultimately at stake for each author. After these divergences, I will then describe how confluences in these texts, manifested in the themes of literacy, sexuality, history, and power, lead to a powerful joint concluding argument that the racial divide can be healed through Americans connecting with one another.

12 Million Black Voices and *Nothing Personal* end with a similar plea to the reader for action to be taken among other textual confluences; however, from the very first pages critical divergences are evident in the visual layout of Wright's and Baldwin's photo-texts. Wright's text for *12 Million Black Voices* relates very directly to the photographs, so much so that his essay has not been published without them. The layout emphasizes the entwined nature of the visual and the verbal, with photos and text sharing space throughout. Sometimes short phrases, pulled from the text, serve as titles to the

photographs. For example, “the laws of Queen Cotton rule our lives” is printed below a photograph showing the legs and feet of two cotton pickers with tattered shoes and improvised protective pads for kneeling in the fields (12MBV 39). “Queen Cotton” does rule how these men dress, the work they do, and the toll it takes on their bodies. Wright also tethers together the text and the photographs by describing the lives of African-Americans, from slave, to sharecropper, to hopeful Northern city dweller. When Wright describes the “the word ‘Negro’...a psychological island whose objective forms is the most unanimous fiat in all American history...The steep cliffs of this island are manifest, on the whole, in the conduct of whites toward us hour by hour,” his words are given weight by the accompanying images (12MBV 30-31). “The conduct of whites” is exemplified by a Dorothea Lange photograph of a plantation owner, a heavy white man who confidently stands with his shining car over a group of painfully thin workers. The photos confront the viewers in ways that bolster Wright’s words, as the subservient body language of the men stands in stark contrast to the plantation owner’s arrogance and sneering expression. “Conduct of the whites” is not an academic construct, but a visibly ingrained “hour by hour” repression. The photographs give the “millions of folk like us” an undeniable humanity (12MBV 31).

Another example of Wright’s text acting as titles for the photographs include two images of young sharecroppers in their homes. The first, by Jack Delano, is listed in the back of *12 Million Black Voices* as “Interior of Rural House, Virginia,” a title that does not acknowledge the young African-American woman in the foreground (12MBV 151). The second, Russell Lee’s “Sharecropper’s son, Missouri,” does acknowledge the presence of the young African-American boy lying a rusty metal bed, but does so only

through the lens of his paternity (12MBV 151). The FSA title reinforces the relentless discrimination that will ultimately force the boy to take his father's place in the fields without hope for any social or economic advancement. Yet these titles are not published with the actual photographs. Instead Wright's text reads, under the young woman's and the boy's photographs which are printed on facing pages: "There are times.....when we doubt our songs" (12MBV 76-77). Wright gives these young people interior lives with emotions and dreams while shattering the American racial myth about the spiritual songs sung together by African-Americans working in the fields. Spirituals often reflected Christian imagery of a promised land but African-Americans knew the emptiness of that promise. Furthermore, despite the perceived communal nature of spirituals, Wright finds songs "are not enough to unify our fragile folk lives in this competitive world" of the Northern city (12MBV 75). Wright is able, with just a few words, to give unnamed people the capacity for critical thinking while arguing against a stereotypical view of the role of Christianity and music in African-American lives. African-Americans doubt both the Christian worldview of the songs as well as the inflated power of songs to better their lives. Instead Wright argues for equal economic and social opportunity as the text and the photographs continue their entwined layout to the end of *12 Million Black Voices*. Wright's text adds deeper meaning to the FSA photographs while the portal of photographs adds context and structure to his sometimes poetic and fragmented text.

The entwined nature of Wright's photo-text contrasts with Baldwin's essay for *Nothing Personal*, which is often published and anthologized without Avedon's photographs. While *Nothing Personal* is not reliant upon the photographs, the essay intersects with the visuals by adding weight and meaning to the photographs through

questioning basic American assumptions. Baldwin's essay is not integrated with Avedon's photographs; instead, the layout of the two is separate, with no one photograph directly described by the essay. The text challenges Avedon's photographs of Americans by describing how the American media's "role is not to communicate, but simply to reassure" (NP 698). Americans are lulled into complacency by shiny false images by magazine photographers like Avedon. Knowing this, readers can then look at the photographs with a more critical eye. When Baldwin writes, "we are unbelievably ignorant concerning what goes on in our country...and appear to have become too timid to question what we are told," he forces readers to engage actively with Avedon's photographs, rather than be passive consumers (NP699). Baldwin reminds readers that the myths Americans tell themselves about the founding of the United States are just as false as television commercials: "I know that the myth tells us that heroes came, looking for freedom, just as the myth tells us that America is full of smiling people" (NP 693). Knowing this, the photographs of smiling Americans such as segregationists Leander Perez and George Wallace take on a sinister and performative quality that seem to embody Baldwin's assertion that "the relevant truth is that the country was settled by a desperate, divided, and rapacious horde of people who were determined to forget their pasts and determined to make money" (NP 693-4). Readers use Baldwin's text to construct interpretations of Avedon's photographs. Avedon's photographs have more meaning when seen through Baldwin's text because, without it, the photographs can be passively flipped through like a celebrity magazine.

Yet Baldwin finds that it is not just the media that constructs a false version of Americans. Americans themselves are also responsible for their inability to see the truth about each other and themselves. Baldwin writes:

It has always been much easier to (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within. And yet, the terror within is far truer and far more powerful than any of our labels: the labels change, the terror is constant. And this terror has something to do with that irreducible gap between the self one invents—the self one takes oneself as being, which is, however, and by definition, a provisional self – and the undiscoverable self which always has the power to blow the provisional self to bits. (NP 694-695)

Here, Baldwin instructs readers to both look critically at the portraits, as the people photographed show their invented selves, as well as look critically inside themselves in an effort to reduce the gap between their own invented self and their “undiscoverable self” (NP 695). Perhaps it is easier to be critical of Southern segregationists, photographed with props and facial expressions that reflect their inflated sense of self such as uniforms and sneers, than to critically consider how one’s own self has, perhaps more subtly, contributed to racism. Baldwin’s text questions the lies inherent in Avedon’s portraits as well as in all Americans. Constructed personal myths are as damaging as institutionalized national myths.

While the relationship between photographs and texts is one difference between *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*, distinctions also exist within the texts. Current scholars, when considering *12 Million Black Voices*, tend to take note of

Wright's use of the pronoun "we." Wright begins his text with: "Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem" (12MBV 10). By doing so, Wright immediately establishes both who *he* is, an African-American, and who the intended *you*, or reader is, white Americans. Jeff Allred's article "From Eye to We" explores how "Wright's *we* challenges received notions of geography, history, and identity" by "emphasizing the split between the modern and wide-ranging voice that 'speaks' this text and the millions of more constricted and provincial voices from which it has emerged in a violent history" (Allred 550). The "we" in *12 Million Black Voices* is both from the past and from the present. Additionally, Allred notes that the use of "we" labels the reader "a *you* set apart from the writerly *we*," which creates a dynamic in which the "we" is instructing the "you" (Allred 552). In "Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*: Refiguring the American Jeremiad," Karen Roggenkamp further complicates the "we" by finding that it changes over the course of the book from a collective African-American voice to one that joins African-American and white workers, and then to one that encompasses "a potential new American character in which a multi-racial, class conscious society" where "America will finally match her promise" (145). Wright's "we" encompasses what he describes at the beginning of *12 Million Black Voices* as "an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space" (12MBV 11). "We" extends back and forward in time as well as across racial lines in a fluid manner throughout the course of the text.

But *12 Million Black Voices* is not just full of African-Americans' "emotions and longings" (12MBV 40). Wright's inner feelings appear in his use of the pronouns "us" and "we" too. Wright more typically shies away from using a personal and individual tone in his writing, and instead offers an academic and somewhat bloodless voice, as noted by Harold Bloom in his criticism of *Native Son*. Bloom finds Wright's protagonist Bigger to be "something between an ideological image, and the mimesis of an actuality." (Bloom 4). Wright could keep himself at a remove from his characters, who, as a result, could lack specificity and individuality and instead be interpreted as being only simulations of people. But in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright puts himself in the center of these "twelve million black voices." Wright does not stand apart. The man who later wrote a novel entitled *The Outsider* (1953) is anything but an outsider in this work -- Wright is himself a part of the experiences and emotions of centuries of African-Americans. Much of Wright's other work is characterized by a relentless focus on external motivators and social science. In the introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* by St. Clare Drake and Horace Cayton, Jr., Wright explains that "it was from...scientific facts that I observed some of that quota of inspiration necessary to write *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*" (Drake and Cayton xviii). Here, Wright credits external scientific facts with inspiring his autobiographical work. This is not surprising because in Wright's 1944 essay published in *The God That Failed*³ he admits that for him, "in all the sprawling immensity of our mighty continent, the least known factor of living was the human heart" (Crossman 162). Wright later wrote in an early draft of *Black Boy*:

³ *The God that Failed* is a 1949 collection of essays by ex-Communists detailing the reasons for their departure from the party.

Many people used to remark about the fact that I was seemingly unemotional. Of course, I was not. I had my emotions. Yet I cannot say that my mother, or my grandmother, or my grandfather was emotional. Most of the time I could not tell what they were thinking or feeling...Perhaps, without knowing it, I too, had caught some of their spirit. (Rowley 23)

Wright was typically unable to imagine others' emotions or entirely access his own emotions when writing. It was easier for him to get a foothold of inspiration on facts, statistics, and science than on his own internal memories, emotions, and imagination.

But something about the photographs must have unleashed Wright's emotions. Wright had experienced the Jim Crow South, the Great Migration, the terrible Northern coldness and hostility of Chicago, and the poverty and hunger that was constant in all these episodes of his life⁴. When he looked at the FSA photos of Southern cotton pickers and laborers, those pictured might well be him as a child or his friends or family. Wright had also personally experienced the squalor of Northern boarding houses and the difficulty of finding city work. The move North was not an immediate economic or social advancement for Wright, as he remembered the horror of it forever: "In 1960, the last year of his life, Richard Wright would tell an interviewer on French radio that nothing in his life, before or since, was as difficult or traumatic as that journey from the South to the North" (Rowley 52). But Wright's affinity for statistics and science became subsumed by his own history and emotions when he looked at the FSA photographs. In *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright realized the promise made in *The God that Failed* when he

⁴ Detailed biographical information regarding Wright's early life can be found in Chapters 1-3 (pp. 1-73) of *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* by Hazel Rowley, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

determined that “I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo; and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human” (Crossman 162). Wright “wanted to shape people’s feeling, awaken their hearts” (Crossman 146). While Wright’s other works did shape people’s feelings about the effects of racism on American society, in *12 Million Black Voices* he touches readers’ hearts. Even other acclaimed African-American authors were moved by Wright’s poetic prose, as “Ralph Ellison wrote in a letter that he ‘found himself opened up and crying over the painful pattern of remembered things’” after reading *12 Million Black Voices* (Rowley 260). Rather than keeping a social scientist’s distance, Wright allows himself to be emotionally and personally at the center of this book. Wright’s text for *12 Million Black Voices* is deeply personal, lyrical, and both a departure in style from *Native Son* and a precursor to his impressionistic 1945 memoir of his childhood in the South, *Black Boy*.

The photographs in *Twelve Million Black Voices* seem to have affected Wright by replacing emotional remoteness in his writing with intimacy. Wright allows himself to access the beautiful and bittersweet emotions of human existence. He casts a tender eye upon African-American life and illustrates the photographs with graceful language. Wright gives readers beautiful sentences such as a description of Southern landscapes:

Our southern springs are filled with quiet noises and scenes of growth.

Apple buds laugh into blossom. Honeysuckles creep up the sides of houses. Sunflowers nod in the hot fields. From mossy tree to mossy tree-- oak, elm, willow, aspen, sycamore, dogwood, cedar, walnut, ash, and

hickory -- bright green leaves jut from a million branches to form an awning that tries to shield and shade the earth. Blue and pink kites of small boys sail in the windy air. (12MBV 32)

Wright sees the beauty of a land that has oppressed his family and people and offers readers a sensory experience of the glorious Southern spring. Photographs that accompany this passage include one that depicts agricultural day laborers filing into a field with hoes resting on their backs and another of a solitary man tilling a barren field. Wright describes a beauty that is unseen in the photographs that focus instead on the grinding daily life of farm laborers. African-Americans' economic inequality does not allow for experiences of nature beyond the dusty parameters of plantations, yet Southern land has an allure that Wright never forgot: "the land we till is beautiful, with red and black and brown clay, with fresh and hungry smells" (12MBV 32). Wright expands the scope of the photographs and truly does sing to white readers in giving them not only a gentle picture of the South, but a reminder that African-Americans also feel a deep emotional attachment to its beautiful land. Wright earlier tells readers "we are not what we seem" and the passage cited above is but one example of how, despite white assumptions, African-Americans are not unfeeling tools of labor in the FSA photographs but are instead humans who deeply experience surroundings (12MBV 10). Wright later builds upon this poetic use of nature by employing the technique to reflect childhood inner feelings in *Black Boy*:

There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came on to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning.

There was the vague sense of the infinite as I looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant banks of Natchez.

There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky. (*Black Boy* 7-8)

In *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Wright finds a way to access and describe his “human heart” through the landscape of his childhood, a device that subsequently serves him well in *Black Boy*. The photographic portal takes Wright to sense memories as he expands the frame of the FSA photographs and describes the land outside of the cotton fields. The beautiful imagery of an unspoiled Southern landscape then leads Wright to emotional memories of how he felt as a child when he originally saw these vistas.

Wright’s first-person plural pronoun use in *12 Million Black Voices* reflects his absorption into African-American history, but in the turbulent 1960’s Baldwin’s *Nothing Personal* finds no such pronoun stability. Baldwin’s struggle to find a consistent pronoun to use in *Nothing Personal* is worth noting because previously he consistently used the dispassionate “one” rather than “I” or “we.” Before *Nothing Personal* “whites...were subtly comforted by the fact that in the *Notes [of a Native Son]* essays, when he is not speaking from a first-person autobiographical perspective, Baldwin tends to assume the point of view of ‘one of us’ (white Americans) looking objectively at ‘them’ (black Americans)” (Leeming 101). Rather than taking “white consciousness through the horrors of the black dilemma,” in *Nothing Personal* Baldwin seems to struggle with how to take his own consciousness through what he has witnessed (Leeming 101). Baldwin was previously comfortable when writing using either a personal autobiographical voice

or a disembodied outside observer's voice, but by the time he wrote *Nothing Personal* he had become personally and politically invested in the Civil Rights Movement and was trying to find a collective African American voice to use in his work. Baldwin's lectures around this time period are notable because "the primary device...involved the speaker's use of himself and his audience as rhetorical actors in his nation's history," which means that, rather than solely considering himself as an individual or viewing African-Americans as an "other," he is trying to speak for an American black consciousness (Leeming 218). The pronoun jumps in *Nothing Personal* reflect Baldwin's unsteady movement from outside observer to political actor and add to the disconnected tone of his writing as he searches for his place within the text.

Nothing Personal continually presents the disconnections in American society. When Baldwin describes "our absolutely unspeakable loneliness, and the spectacular ugliness and hostility of our cities," he seems to have lost all hope for Americans (NP 694). Baldwin, whose dominant theme was love, was unable to find love in America. "Our cities are terribly unloved -- by the people who live in them, I mean. No one seems to feel that the city belongs to him," he writes, again zigzagging between pronouns, in this case our, I, and him in close succession (NP 694). Avedon's photographs amplify the watery quality of his subjects' eyes, a technique that makes them appear to be brimming with emotion and vulnerability; however Baldwin does not see empathy in American society but instead worries that "the nature of the movement of the people in the streets is certainly very close to panic. You will search in vain for lovers" (NP 695). Baldwin struggles to make sense of America and his place in it. He puts himself in the position of not just outsider, but foreigner, when he writes of those newly arrived and not yet jaded

people in cities, “one felt that one might approach them without freezing to death” (NP 696). Baldwin removes himself from moments in the text like: “God help the innocent here, that man or woman who simply wants to love, and be loved” (NP 699). “That man or woman” indicates a universal, rather than personal, situation. But towards the end, Baldwin again inserts himself into the text, writing that he has “been cold and hungry all my life, have felt that no fire would ever warm me, and no arms would ever hold me” (NP 705). Baldwin himself is revealed to be the one who “simply wants to love, and be loved.” Even though Baldwin writes that American cities are “no place for love” and seems to only see bleakness and loneliness in the American psyche, he has not abandoned the philosophy that love will be what will ultimately save individuals and the greater American society, “for I have always felt that a human being could only be saved by another human being” (NP 700). As I have previously written, Wright feels no such instability in *12 Million Black Voices* but is instead able to infuse the pronoun “we” with layered meanings that extend from past and present African-Americans, to Wright himself, and then ultimately all Americans. Wright’s confident and consistent diction is in direct contrast with Baldwin’s uncertainty.

The divergences in *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal* such as how the texts interact with their respective photographs and how Wright and Baldwin position themselves in their texts reveal what was ultimately at stake for each author. Wright and Baldwin took different approaches because of their different goals as writers. Wright appears to support the American dream of social and economic mobility and uses his text to enhance the ability of the photographs to show African-Americans as equal in emotion, critical thinking, and history as white Americans, thus making the case for equal

opportunity. Wright wants the reader to change their mythic and ossified view of African-Americans and does so consistently with enhancing descriptions of the FSA photographs that give those pictured context and individuality. Baldwin, on the other hand, wants readers to question their own mythic view of America and themselves. To do so, he creates a text that unsettles viewers and forces them to, while questioning the lies in the photographs, question their own lies. White Americans' perception of themselves is at stake for Baldwin, not their perception of African-Americans. Rather than accepting the mythical American dream, Baldwin hopes to find new ways forward based upon personal and national honesty.

Despite this divergence of purpose, many moments of confluence exist in Wright's and Baldwin's photo-texts. Wright's ideas in *12 Million Black Voices* prefigure one of James Baldwin's most famous essays. Baldwin's 1979 essay "If Black English isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is" details how and why African-Americans transformed their white masters' language to better suit their own communication and cultural needs. Baldwin seems to agree with Wright's earlier analysis of how African American communication evolved. Baldwin writes: "Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language" (*Collected Essays* 782). Wright writes: "no two of us who spoke a common tongue would be thrown together" which meant that "though we could hear, we were deaf" (12MBV 40). The enslaved Africans "polished our new words, caressed them, gave them new shape and color, a new order and tempo" and furthermore "we charged this meagre horde of stolen sounds with all the emotions and longings we had" (12MBV 40). Readers sense the pleasure that Wright took in writing *12 Million Black Voices* with its lingering

descriptions. Wright's prose is "more cadenced, rhythmic, and filled with parallelisms and lists -- is more oral and aural than any of [his] book length works" (Relyea 143). Reading these slow and full descriptions causes the reader to engage equally thoughtfully with the photographs. The preacher-style tempo of Wright's descriptions sets the tempo for viewers to look at the photographs. Not only did the development of African-American English affect the way the former slaves and their descendants spoke, but the language Wright himself uses is affected in *12 Million Black Voices*. Baldwin explicitly acknowledges the role of the church in shaping African-American English vernacular, as "within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed" ("If Black English" 782). The repetitions of the pulpit infuse Wright's text and affect readers to great poetic effect, as in the anaphora "We, who:"

We, who had barely managed to live in family groups

We, who needed the ritual and guidance of institutions

We, who had never belonged to any organizations except the church and burial societies

We, who had had our personalities blasted with two hundred years of slavery.

(12MBV 94-97)

The crescendo in the last line shatters an American myth -- *slavery* has caused the effects experienced in the previous three lines. While white America might criticize African-Americans for their perceived broken families, dependence upon the government, or lack of their own support structures, Wright forcefully and in the style of a preacher builds up to *why* this is so.

Wright further explains the important role of language and literacy in African American lives and how “in a vague, sentimental way we love books inordinately, even though we do not know how to read them, for we know that books are a gateway to a forbidden world” (12MBV 64). Wright owed his improved circumstances to literacy, so it is no wonder that he writes: “any black man who can read a books is a hero to us” (12MBV 64). A photo by Jack Delano in *12 Million Black Voices* of “Tenant’s children reading” shows five children reading books and sitting together at a kitchen table, but both the table and the walls are literally papered with newspapers (12MBV 65). Newspapers are used both as tablecloth and wallpaper, so the children read surrounded by a sea of words. This photograph shows both the power of literacy, as the thick books and serious expressions of the children show their determination to read, but also how what is discarded by white Americans is, by necessity, used by African-Americans for basic purposes. African-Americans, forced to use trash to furnish their homes, take notice that “the people who say how the world is run, who have fires in winter, who wear warm clothes, who get enough to eat, are the people who make books speak to them” (12MBV 64). But there is a possibility that America might “admit the black folk into the national family by virtue of a shared relationship to print culture” (Allred 561). Surrounded by newspaper articles that no doubt reflect white Americans’ dominance in the United States, these young African American children have figured out that a key to being properly clothed, fed, and housed is literacy. However, literacy as liberator is complicated by Wright’s text, which notes that “In many states they edit the textbooks that our children study, for the most part deleting all references to government, voting, citizenship, and civil rights” (12MBV 64). The white hegemony has “arranged the order

of life in the South so that a different set of ideals is inculcated in the opposing black and white groups” (12MBV 64). There must be a “redistribution of the means of acquiring literacy” before the act of reading can truly transform America (Allred 562). As an autodidact, Wright knows that the relationship between power and literacy is fraught with tension as those with power “get angry when they think that we desire to learn more that they want us to” (12MBV 64). The gatekeepers of literacy allow only limited entrance to African-Americans in an effort to maintain existing power structures. Avedon’s photograph of “Jerome Smith, Isaac Reynolds, students” in *Nothing Personal* seems to similarly respond to the marginalized education of African-Americans by elevating the status of these two black students to comparably framed portraits of President Dwight D. Eisenhower and scientist Linus Pauling. Avedon accords these young men equal status with exalted white Americans by the serious attention he pays to their close up camera angle and the double page layout. Decades later, education and power were still a fraught area in American race relations, and Baldwin knows this: “to become educated...is to become inaccessibly independent, it is to acquire a dangerous way of assessing danger, and it is to hold in one’s hands a means of changing reality” (NP 703). In both these photo-texts to become literate is to become powerful.

Power and sexuality, another fraught relationship, is also limned in both *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*. Russell Lee’s photograph entitled “Black Dancer, Chicago” shows nine pastie-topped women dancing with deadened expressions for a white night club audience (12MBV 21). Rather than a raucous and encompassing Folies Bergère atmosphere, this photo reflects a divide between the dancers and the audience. The dancers look joyless, while the men and women in the audience regard the

women's nakedly displayed flesh. Power resides with the viewers, not with those onstage, who perform cordoned off by metal railings.

Similarly, Avedon's famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe in *Nothing Personal* pictures her with eyes that are disassociated from the audience, in this case the viewer of the photograph. When published, critics complained that Monroe "appears before us in an obvious unguarded moment, slack and listless," but now this photo is appreciated for being one of the few that show Monroe "with all of her usual signs of beauty...deprived of their usually seductive qualities" (Brustein 10, Miller "A Striking Addiction" 180). Avedon shows Monroe without her performative mask in a shrunken photograph that is a small fraction of his more typical full-page layout. She appears tiny and inward, rather than bouncily larger-than-life as she was more characteristically pictured. Avedon's photograph "insists on the complexity of 'image' as a lived and manufactured form" and gives viewers a glimpse at the reality behind the myth of the sexy Hollywood star (Blair 185). The texts of both *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal* also nod toward this exploitation of female beauty and sexuality and the pervasiveness of myths in American culture.

For his part, Wright equates the dancers with all African-American laborers, such as maids, sharecroppers, stevedores, and waiters, who are treated with a "paternalistic code...which has survived, grown, spread, and congealed into a national tradition" (12MBV 18). Wright attempts to shatter the myth that African-Americans' place is to serve whites by making clear that this is a social construct, a "tradition." White Americans found "our black bodies were good tools" which were desirable for both industry and pleasure (12MBV 25). But these "tools" are given no agency, so while the

women might dance as instructed to and the stevedores pictured opposite in *12 Million Black Voices* might move cargo quickly, in unguarded moments they all appear deflated, like Marilyn Monroe. The centuries-old American myth that “poverty, abuse, and injustice alike the negro accepts with imperturbable cheerfulness,” as Riis describes in *How the Other Half Lives*, is at odds with these photos (Riis 159).

Baldwin begins *Nothing Personal* with a similarly ironic take on television commercial sexuality: “Blondes and brunettes and, possibly, redheads - my screen was colorless - washing their hair, relentlessly smiling, teeth gleaming like the grillwork of automobiles, breasts firmly, chillingly encased - packaged, as it were - and brilliantly uplifted, forever” but “the myth tells us that America is full of smiling people” (NP 692). Behind the guise of sexy dancer, television model, or even iconic movie star lies a person who was constructed by American society as a tool to support a mythic image of happiness and perfection, but whose soul is elsewhere, tiny and slowly dying. White Americans do not lead completely perfect and happy lives, and African-Americans are not happy leading lives of labor and service. The photographs and the texts of *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal* pull in the same direction by shattering the sexual myths created by white America to cement their social and economic power.

Wright and Baldwin replace American history myths with a more inclusive vision by reclaiming the power of African-American personal history in *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*. Roland Barthes casts an eye at one of Avedon’s *Nothing Personal* portraits, but is, unlike Baldwin and the weddings, highly moved. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes ponders “William Casby, born a slave,” a photo which has been called “one of the most vivid faces in the history of portraiture” (Kozloff 93). The caption of the

photo, however, not the photo itself, provides initial meaning as “a point of departure...[it] orients the spectator and then leaves the image to do its work” (Scott 47). By knowing that this man was born a slave, viewers (and Barthes) search for lost history in his face. Barthes finds that “the essence of slavery is laid bare. The mask is the meaning” (Barthes 34). Casby’s face “certifies that slavery has existed, not so far from us” (Barthes 79). When viewers gaze into the eyes of this formerly enslaved man, the human cost of slavery becomes undeniable. Richard Wright’s words from *12 Million Black Voices* come to mind: “For hours we sit on our porches and stare out over the dusty land, wondering why we are so tired...our eyes grow dull and our skin sags” (12MBV 59). Casby’s worn face contains a portal to history. Viewers can stare into his eyes, across the railway tracks, and ponder his life. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, in her article “Negative-Positive Truths,” perfectly captures the viewers’ time-travel experience: “Eclipsed between this man’s birth as a slave and his capture as an object before Avedon’s lens is the length of a life gone unremarked except as a sign of physical continuity between past and present” (19). The distance that viewers travel between the caption and the image of William Casby is vast.

A caption from *12 Million Black Voices* similarly engages African-Americans with their history. The photograph by Jack Delano of “Sharecropper and wife, Georgia” contains the chapter heading, “Inheritors of Slavery” (12MBV 29). The sharecropper and his wife are seated in their clean and tidy home under their wedding portraits, which “proposes not their difference from but their likeness to the viewer” (Blair 84). Their wedding portraits, however, tell of a lost prosperity, and this juxtaposition of past and present forces the viewer to confront what might have happened as the ascension of the

Jim Crow South eclipsed the hopeful first years of Reconstruction. The caption both temporally links the couple with this time period, and makes viewers consider what slavery has passed down...certainly not the wealth of Southern cotton industry. Decades later, Baldwin finds the "Inheritors of Slavery" are not descendants of enslaved persons but instead are "poor white" people who cannot see that "a myth...controls and blasts their lives" (NP 694). Baldwin tells this "poor man that he has far more in common with the ex-slaves whom he fears than with the masters who oppress them both for profit" (NP 694). Wright also follows the history of racist economics in *12 Million Black Voices*. White capitalists "pit us [African-Americans] against the prejudiced white population and in turn put them against us" (12MBV 121). Wright exhorts whites to "look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, for we are you" (12MBV 146). Look at the photo of William Caswell and the sharecropper and his wife, read Baldwin's and Wright's texts, and not only does African-Americans' past as enslaved humans become evident, but America's economic history as enslaver and exploiter of both impoverished whites and African-Americans becomes bleakly evident.

Power's relationship with violence in American society is also detailed in *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*. The photographic juxtapositions in *Nothing Personal* reflect the divisions between violent and non-violent leaders in the 1960s. The founder of the American Nazi Party, George Lincoln Rockwell, is photographed while saluted by his followers, themselves a contrast to his stiffly ironed military disposition. These subordinate men are more rumpled and less crisp, both in bearing and clothing than their leader, who looks at the viewer sideways, as if acknowledging his own awareness that his followers are deficient. While Rockwell had been a military leader in

WWII, his decision to a leadership role in this racist fringe group made him a martinet of mediocrity rather than elite forces⁵. The irony is that one of the men pictured, John Patler, would assassinate Rockwell several years after the photograph was taken when discharged from the party. Baldwin seems to be referencing this photo when he writes in *Nothing Personal* that men in this country are “absolutely indistinguishable from the American boy” (NP 693). Both Avedon and Baldwin respond to the noxious subject of the American Nazi Party in the same manner -- by seeing the inner stunted selves of the members. Avedon allows the leader to be photographed as he wishes, but in choosing to publish the photograph with that sidelong glance Avedon amplifies the speck of Rockwell’s self-awareness that he is the leader of nothing. Similarly, Baldwin diffuses the hate and violence of the Nazi credo by reminding his readers that they are boys who have not been able to grow of out childish and uneducated beliefs. Avedon and Baldwin emphasize the stunted quality of these men, not their hateful rhetoric.

Opposite this photo of the embodiment of the toxicity of hate appears a photo of poet Allan Ginsburg, naked, facing the camera, holding one arm in an open-handed salute to us, the viewers, and the other arm holding his belly. Ginsburg’s calm demeanor, coupled with his nudity, presents an image with no pretense and no threat; rather, he embodies an openhearted love towards the viewer, and his gesture is in stark contrast to that of the American Nazis, who salute their leader rather than the viewers. Ginsburg does not need a uniform or weapons to prove himself a leader; instead, his nudity reveals a bravery and a knowing awareness of his own charisma. Perhaps Ginsburg embodies

⁵ Biographical information about Rockwell is from Berlet, Chip. "Rockwell, George Lincoln (1918–1967)." *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, edited by Roger Chapman, and James Ciment, Routledge, 2nd edition, 2013. *Credo Reference*.

Baldwin's thought that "wherever love is found, it unfailingly makes itself felt in the individual, the personal authority of the individual" (NP 699). Love is what gives us agency, even if elsewhere in *Nothing Personal* Baldwin has trouble finding evidence of warmth and compassion in America.

Warmth and compassion seem absent, too, when considering the antecedents of George Lincoln Rockwell and his men. The troubling photo of a lynching in *12 Million Black Voices* provides an opportunity to remember just a few decades earlier "such traumas were rendered routine and systemic" (Allred 559). Is this violence what the boyish Rockwell aspires to? Surprisingly, Wright is fairly quiet on the subject of lynching, as "this image defies categorization or comment, a feature that is underscored formally by the uncaptioned and bleeding layout" (Allred 559). The photo's horror speaks for itself, both in the gruesomeness of the dead African-American and in the proudly casual white murderers who surround him. Wright comments nearby that "most of the floggings and lynchings occur at harvest time" (when the African-American sharecroppers were to be paid by landowners for their crops) but does not further detail the terrible violence that was part and parcel of the Southern hegemony (12MBV 41). Wright leaves the photo of a "black body as pure object" to be internally parsed by the viewer, with no help from him (Allred 558). Some terrors need no words.

Yet in *12 Million Black Voices* hope emerges in how "like black buttercups, our children spring up on the red soil of the plantations" (12MBV 59). The photos of sharecropper families show numerous children standing close to one another, and Wright finds that "a child is a glad thing in the bleak stretches of the cotton country" because children provide farm labor, but also because of the love a child brings to communities

(12MBV 59). Wright notes “our delicate families are held together by love, sympathy, pity, and the goading knowledge that we must work together to make a crop” (12MBV 60). Familial love and cooperation are important factors in sharecroppers’ daily survival. Wright and Roskam include many images of sleeping children, such as “Rural child asleep at home,” taken in Maryland by Jack Delano, which shows a toddler with a pacifier napping in a rundown room with peeling wallpaper, and Russell Lee’s “Bedroom” taken in Chicago, in which three young children sleep on a thin mattress, covered with a tattered patchwork blanket in a room that appears to be closing in on itself with rot (12MBV 63, 107). The children in both instances belie their tragic circumstances, as their peaceful faces and shining skin are the only spot of beauty in their homes.

The impetus for Wright’s and Baldwin’s texts is ultimately children, as they will be the beneficiaries of improved racial relations. This emphasis on children is evident in Avedon’s *Nothing Personal* portrait of Martin Luther King, III. Rather than picturing his father, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Avedon studiously frames his eldest son, whose face is as bright and shining as the sleeping children in *12 Million Black Voices*. Avedon knows that Dr. King’s Civil Rights legacy will be in the lives of children. Baldwin, too, knows that children will ultimately be the beneficiaries of his generations’ successes and failures. Baldwin worries “how is it possible for the child to grow up if the child is not loved?” (NP 702-703). While this might appear to be a simple sentiment, Baldwin complicates familial love by also asking, “How is it possible to love the child if one does not know who one is?” (NP 702). Americans must no longer “live by lies” about themselves and their place in the world, if only because future generations are at stake

(NP 698). Children cannot be loved unless Americans are honest with themselves and with their children. Future generations, such as Dr. King's son, will bear the fruits of that effort or pay the price for the failure.

Yet Wright knows that African-Americans will survive because "our gold is in the hearts of the people we love, in the veins that carry our blood, upon those faces where we catch furtive glimpses of the shape of our humble souls" (12MBV 59). Love, as in Baldwin's work, has the power to heal and change a racist America. Wright acknowledges this when he describes how with "this reservoir of human feeling...we shall pour out our hearts over this land" (12MBV 73).

12 Million Black Voices and *Nothing Personal* explore the ramifications of American race relations in the areas of literacy, education, sexuality, history, and violence and present the possibility of connecting with one another as the way forward. Humans' need for love, both expressed and received, is a basic tenet of a healthy society. The FSA's and Avedon's photographs are used to stimulate viewers into knowing others as well as themselves, to stare both inwardly and across railroad tracks to form connections. Wright's purpose in his photo-text was to change the racist myths that perpetuate the economic and social discrimination of African-Americans, while Baldwin sought to make white Americans question national myths about the founding of America as well as the personal myths that construct identity. Yet ultimately these two photo-texts seek to upend racial myths by reminding Americans that while our society was built with an unequal relationship between whites and African-Americans, the best way forward to sustain American is through shared partnership and purpose.

PORTALS TO TODAY

Nothing Personal and *12 Million Black Voices* retain their relevance in the post-Ferguson America of today⁶. The photographs still have the power to affect hearts and minds, and Baldwin and Wright's texts still limn a nation that struggles with its past. Through close reading photographs and texts, I have shown how jointly analyzing *Nothing Personal* and *12 Million Black Voices* offers the current dialogue a path that looks for moments of convergence rather than dissonance in the work of James Baldwin and Richard Wright. Polarization is prevalent today in American civic discourse, but looking for connections is a way to bridge ideological divides. The world needs Baldwin's ability to hold divergent ideas in balance. In Baldwin's 1961 essay "Alas, Poor Richard," he writes, "But one must first accept this paradox, *with joy*" (italics mine) (267). Baldwin is describing how all people must accept that violence is "the past, and the everlasting potential, or temptation, of the human race" (267). This knowledge, accepted "with joy," becomes the "source of all our power" (267). We must accept the difficulties inherent in life with an attitude of joy. This is what Wright is able to do in *12 Million Black Voices*. He acknowledges pain but it is done with joy, with an appreciation for the beauty in the land, the people, and the written word. And Wright's comment in *12 Million Black Voices* that "deep down we are glad that our children feel the world hard enough to yearn to wrestle with it" can be applied to Baldwin's shift from observer to

⁶ The Ferguson Unrest is protest movement that began after the fatal shooting of an unarmed man, Michael Brown, by a Ferguson, Missouri police officer, on August 9, 2014.

activist (12MBV 135). In *Nothing Personal*, Baldwin feels pain, frustration, and anger deeply enough that his text “opens possibilities for productively frictional, affectively complex responses to the turbulence” of America in the 1960s (Blair 197). Americans today will be lucky if “our children feel the world hard enough to yearn to wrestle” with social issues (12MBV 135). Compassionate activism might be a way to fully “achieve our country and change the history of the world,” as Baldwin writes in “Down at the Cross” (346-347).

12 Million Black Voices and *Nothing Personal* offer much to today’s America. When re-released in 2017, a critic found that “revisiting this book, we can’t help but relate to what Baldwin and Avedon felt in their time and lament, even if we’re unsurprised, how little has changed” (Risch 22). The American racial divide that Baldwin and Avedon sought to heal in *Nothing Personal* is still present. And, sadly, the portrayal of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s son as his inheritor came to pass. Martin Luther King III grew up, like his father, to fight for Civil Rights and head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but, in a more direct link from the time of *Nothing Personal* to today, he spoke at the Ferguson rally in August 2014 to protest the police killing of an unarmed African-American man, Michael Brown (“Rev. Al Sharpton and Martin Luther King III Lead Rally for Brown Family”). The child pictured in Avedon’s portrait now zooms viewers through almost six decades as we consider, in the inverse journey of the portrait of “William Casby, born a slave,” what King III *will* experience, including, in a few years from the photo, the assassination of his father. The “telescope black history” in *Twelve Million Black Voices* is also kept relevant by recent national discussions regarding reparations to descendants of enslaved Africans (Moore 144). Kamala Harris, Cory

Booker, and Elizabeth Warren, to name a few 2020 Democratic presidential candidate hopefuls, have all entered the reparations discussion and called for studies and attention to be paid to the issue (McArdle). While these photo-texts are decades old, historical relevance remains for contemporary readers.

In this essay, I have argued that Wright and Baldwin went through the portal of photography in divergent ways to further their arguments against racism. While Wright directly grounds his texts in the FSA photographs, Baldwin uses the Avedon portraits as backdrop and produces a text that questions the myths that underscore the photographed American hegemony. Wright finds value in the mythical American dream of economic and social advancement, while Baldwin finds that American myths are built on lies. Both approaches are reflective of their specific moments in time and the perspectives of their authors, yet Wright and Baldwin consistently conclude that white Americans and African-Americans must see and accept the shared history that built the nation and segregated its people. An artificially divided society must be transformed into a mutually beneficial community of all races. Finding moments when both texts and both sets of photographs pull together in the same direction only strengthens the power of *12 Million Black Voices* and *Nothing Personal*. Baldwin's and Wright's photo-texts resonate in American society as strongly today as they did over fifty years ago. When readers join Wright and Baldwin's voices and allow their textual claims support each other, a clarion call resounds for American racial equality through the shared connections of its people.



Figure 1. Lee, Russell, *Tenants children reading, Oklahoma*. FSA. *12 Million Black Voices*, pp. 57.



Figure 2. Avedon, Richard, *Jerome Smith, Isaac Reynolds, students. Nothing Personal.*



Figure 3. Lee, Russell, *Entertainers in a night club, Chicago*. FSA. *12 Million Black Voices*, pp. 21.



Figure 4. Avedon, Richard, *Marilyn Monroe*.
Nothing Personal



Figure 5. Avedon, Richard, *William Casby, born a slave. Nothing Personal.*

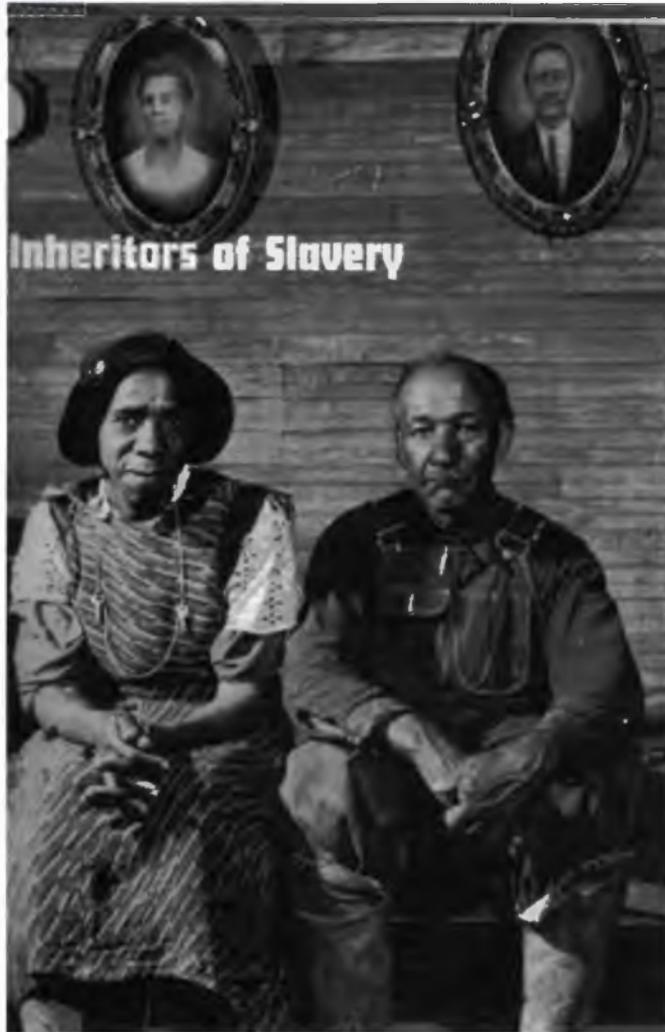


Figure 6. Delano, Jack, *Sharecropper and wife, Georgia*, FSA. *Twelve Million Black Voices*, pp. 29.



Figure 7. Avedon, Richard, *George Lincoln Rockwell. Nothing Personal.*



Figure 8. Avedon, Richard, *Allen Ginsberg. Nothing Personal.*



Figure 9. *Lynching, Georgia*. AP Worldwide Photos. *12 Million Black Voices*, pp. 45.

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