Martin Luther King’s prophetic speaking skills and poignant rhetoric made the oppression of African Americans a matter of urgent public concern at a crucial moment in American history. His “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” offered a white audience not only justification for nonviolent civil disobedience in Alabama and the greater South but also a forewarning of the activism to come, should his words go unheeded. “Oppressed people,” he warned, “cannot remain oppressed forever.”¹ This 1963 statement appeared against the background of images of children and nonviolent marchers attacked by hoses and snarling dogs. Also in 1963, James Baldwin published The Fire Next Time. His intention was to inform White America of the brutal perils facing African American citizens as a last hope before America’s already “burning house” turned to ashes.² Baldwin called for a full recognition of the effects of a history of institutionalized racism plaguing African American communities.

Both pieces, published in 1963, offer an opportunity to compare these two extraordinary writer-critics: their upbringings, connections to their churches, their writing styles, and their understandings of race and racism. Baldwin, a New Yorker, and once a minister, who eventually settled in southern France, was the more cosmopolitan of the two. However, while Baldwin left the church, the church never left Baldwin. In other words, Baldwin stayed deeply influenced by his congregation and what he learned during his time at the pulpit. King, on the other hand, was reared in Black Atlanta and the Baptist church sustained his commitment to it for the rest of his life. For both activists, the Baptist church instilled the importance of humanity and justice, giving each a rhetorical framework for their prophetic warnings to America. Significantly, there has not been a published historical juxtaposition of these men or these works. However, many scholars, such as Charles Payne, have spoken to a shifting organizing paradigm, embraced by youth organizers, which started around the time that Baldwin and King’s works were published.³ Comparing Baldwin and King allows historians to understand what these shifts meant to their generation and how it affected their movement and the discourse on race they encouraged up until 1963.

The Fire Next Time engaged the reader in a vivid illustration of the despair facing Harlem, and Black America more generally. Similarly, King’s epistle to White America proclaimed the urgency of African Americans’ demand for social justice. Both essays offered an understanding of the psychological effects of segregation and racial

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bigotry in America. This paper analyzes how, through their writings, James Baldwin and Martin Luther King, Jr. attempted to find their places in the Black Freedom Struggle, against the backdrop of an increasingly militant approach to these issues. This paper also studies how the comparison of these activists and their rhetoric offers an understanding of the differing influences of the Northern and Southern wings of the Movement.

While this analysis focuses primarily on *The Fire Next Time* and “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” it addresses additional sources to supplement the argument. Throughout their lives, both writers grew as activists and thinkers; however, this paper does not address political understandings that surpass the publications of these documents.

*The Church and Fatherly Roles*

David Baldwin, James Baldwin’s father played a painful role in Baldwin’s life, contributing to his tortured search for acceptance. As a child, James longed for the acceptance that could outweigh the denial of paternal love. A “precocious child of the ghetto,” young James regularly witnessed and analyzed the pervasive degradation of the lived conditions in his neighborhood in Harlem. His own failings as a son and his feelings of hopelessness within Black America were mutually reinforcing.

While Dr. Martin Luther King was famous for his pastoral oratory, it is less known, however, that James Baldwin had a close affiliation with the church as well. Baldwin took on a role as a preacher for three years, starting at fourteen. As his dream to write was squashed by socially imposed conceptions of his blackness, he found the church to be one of a few “gimmick[s]” that was socially acceptable for a young African American man. Because of his broken relationship with his father, Baldwin desperately “wanted to be somebody’s little boy.” And, because of his skin, he was at “the mercy of so many conundrums … someone would have taken [him] over.” In 1940s Harlem, it was either the streets or the church.

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4 This paper understands militancy as a non-negotiable demand for authentic Black freedom. It posed an immediate threat the edifice of White Supremacy. This is not to say that King did not effectively confront American racism. In fact, the efficacy of his movement successed in one way because it garnered attention from J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI as a dangerous group. However, militancy was often deemed more radical and harder to digest for mainstream White America than King’s nonviolent modes of organizing. Throughout this paper, I examine the Nation of Islam as the militant activists that King and Baldwin warned of to White America. King’s movement was more willing to negotiate with White people, whereas the Nation of Islam denounced all White people and sought Black freedom without consideration for and any involvement of White people. King and Baldwin both understood how these opposing forces would lead to violence and havoc in America.

5 The identity of Baldwin’s biological father is unknown. However, David Baldwin, his stepfather, fulfilled a father-figure role for Baldwin, so much that he seldom refers to David as anything but his “father.” This paper thus refers to David Baldwin as Baldwin’s father. For more information see: David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1994), 3-29.


8 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* in Baldwin, 301.

9 In David Leeming’s biography, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, we see how the relationship between Baldwin and his father was strained by Baldwin’s “illegitimacy.” Born out of wedlock, Baldwin’s father blamed him for the circumstances of his birth. Baldwin recalled that his father found his existence “primitive” and un-Christlike. This abusive dynamic was at its most extreme when David suffered from times of mental instability, which grew more frequent towards the end of his life. He died in 1943. Leeming suggests that this dynamic is what pushed Baldwin to the pulpit. For more information see: David Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 7.

10 Ibid., 303.
Baldwin temporarily thrived within the church; however, he soon became disappointed with the lack of motivation within his congregation. He lamented that similar principles governed Black and White churches alike: “Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others.” Baldwin saw the therapeutic function of the Northern church: songs and rhythmic clapping superficially distracted from self-loathing and despair, brought about by an internalized racism. His time in the pulpit further developed his understanding of the ways that racism was not only institutionalized, but also psychologically ingrained into Americans.

In one part of *The Fire Next Time*, “My Dungeon Shook,” a letter written to his namesake and nephew, Baldwin warned his nephew not to succumb to these racial realities. In this letter, Baldwin spoke of an inferiority complex that afflicted African Americans. His most significant experience of this disparaging social construction was that it killed his father. He explained to his nephew that his grandfather “was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him.” Baldwin, although not a father himself, hoped that his nephew would not take on the same insufferable bitterness that he had inherited.

In contrast, Martin Luther King, Jr. inherited a model of self-love, almost impervious to racism, from both his parents and the church. Southern Christianity deeply cemented the Black South. King, born from three generations of preachers, eventually became the fourth. His father, Martin Luther King, Sr. was the son of a sharecropper from Stockbridge, Georgia. King Sr., or Daddy King, challenged racism at an early age, after seeing a white man who demoralized his father. Daddy King acted as president of the Atlanta NAACP and fought for equal salaries for teachers and against “Jim Crow elevators in the courthouse.” As opposed to Baldwin, who grew up witness to a father traumatized by internalized racism, King grew up with constant affirmations of self-love and models of activism. In *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, King explained that his mother “instilled a sense of self-respect in all of her children from the very beginning.” King’s hopeful stance regarding African American advancement, through nonviolence, was a legacy of this parental support. It is significant that though Baldwin’s father was less resilient to racial trauma than King’s father was, both men’s mothers offered love in the face of adversity. Baldwin’s mother exhibited adoration and encompassing tenderness that countered internalized racism.

The ideals present in King’s home were also represented in the larger Baptist community. The Southern church provided a haven for African American Christians, a place that reminded people of their worth and fortified them to prevail against the woes of segregation and bigotry. During his first sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 1954, King preached, “Dexter, like all churches, must somehow lead men and women of a decadent generation to the high mountain of peace and salvation.” To King, the church brought those “on the brink of

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11 Ibid., 305.
12 Ibid., 291.
14 King, Martin Luther, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 1.
15 Ibid, 4.
16 Ibid, 5.
17 Ibid, 3.
19 Ibid, 45.
despair, a new bent on life.”

The promises of racial and spiritual uplift through the church’s continual emphasis on human dignity emboldened him.

While Baldwin was cognizant of the despair that he and other churchgoers were tormented by, the Northern church did not alleviate his inherited anguish, but further awakened him to disheartening oppression. To Baldwin, the Northern church lacked the therapeutic efficacy that the Southern church cultivated. Its vision was too narrow and exclusive. In the early forties, when Baldwin parted from the church, he had an inchoate understanding of his queerness, and began to perceive the world around him through an artistic perspective.

Most significantly, in 1940, Baldwin realized his “illegitimacy” and his father’s hatred of him because of it. Questioning the authenticity of his church, he decided to leave it. Baldwin’s biographer, David Leeming explains, “The wider possibilities of the arts and the flesh had won out over the narrowness of the church.”

Baldwin’s analytical tendencies, intersectional identity, and rearing in the North made him more critical of the church in The Fire Next Time, than King was in “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

However, the Southern church had something that churches in the North did not. Baldwin experienced this in 1959, upon hearing King preach for the first time. He reflected: “There was a feeling in this church which quite transcended anything I have ever felt in a church before.” Baldwin experienced an environment where trust in spiritual truth allowed for the “sustenance for another day’s journey.”

Baldwin’s experiences in the Northern church emphasized the importance of togetherness, but only in the sense that all the members were equally lost. The lack of organization in the Northern church as compared to that in the South troubled Baldwin. He recalled how as a preacher he wished to tell his congregation “to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example a rent strike.”

In King’s church, Baldwin experienced been a genuine sense of community centered around religious ideas, where members experienced strength in the face of struggle and social optimism.

Furthermore, although Baldwin never fathered children, King used his fatherly role to garner support for the Movement in “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” King responded to a white summons for patience within the Black Freedom Movement, explaining how difficult it is to “Wait.” He protested that the white clergymen will never “suddenly find [their] tongue twisted and your speech stammering as [they] seek to explain to [their] six-year-old daughter why … Funtown is closed to colored children … and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid, 27-33.
23 Ibid.
24 Baldwin, “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King” in Baldwin, 643.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 644.
27 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time in Baldwin, 309.
28 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 192.
mental sky."29 This, King insisted, was why his community could no longer “Wait.” Here, he stressed that though the white clergy would never viscerally understand the plight of the “Negro,” they must open their eyes to the realities of their fellow Americans.

Baldwin, too, reflected on his fears for the next generation, explaining that racism, from a young age, is internalized, and thus controls its victims.30 King emphasized the increased responsibility of fatherhood within Black America in order to combat this external influence. Baldwin also depicted racism’s affliction on youth, tending to see African American children as spiritual orphans like him.

Takes on Militancy

By 1963, demands for freedom and dignity had become urgent. In the South, nonviolent protests turned into frustrated riots.31 The dominant Southern approach to nonviolent organizing was losing momentum. In the North, a different religious response germinated. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad founded the Nation of Islam (NOI) in 1930. Muhammad grew up traumatized by racism, after seeing his father lynched when Muhammad was six years old. In The Fire Next Time, Baldwin described Muhammad’s reactionary organization as a reverberation of discourses that he had heard throughout his life. For Baldwin, Muhammad’s relationship to African Americans was in certain respects revolutionary. According to Baldwin, he was able to do what generations of welfare workers and committees and resolutions and reports and housing projects and playgrounds have failed to do: to heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prison and to keep them out.32

His followers—known as Black Muslims—had established a substantial place in African American life by 1961.33 Muhammad’s charisma and validation of African Americans’ humanity empowered the NOI and its movement.

Desensitized to Muslim discourse in Harlem, Baldwin explained that he was most impressed by the fear that Muhammad’s organization instilled in White America. Normally, Baldwin reflected, the police dispersed African American political gatherings, but they acted cautiously around NOI speaking events. Their sudden change in attitude did not come from a newly born humanity, but “because they were afraid,” Baldwin explained, “and I was delighted to see it.”34 Where the Northern church lacked the organizational force that we see in its Southern counterpart, the NOI, through militancy, gave African Americans a power with which White people in power were not ready to reckon.35 This willingness to act by their own script appealed to Northern African Americans, who were socially slighted by racist legislation and whose grievance went unrecognized. The unpredictability of the NOI came from their bold approach to race relations. They would not determine their actions based on the White stage and its rules. The NOI was able to relate to Northern African Americans so to offer them an intense

32 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time in Baldwin, 316.
33 Leeming, James Baldwin: A Biography, 188.
34 Ibid., 314.
35 This paper understands militancy as an unrelenting mobilized force against racism and racially oppressive institutions. A militant movement promotes racial consciousness, determined nonnegotiable goals. It is often seen as “radical” and a national threat by the status quo.
hope, in exchange for their dedication. Thus, the NOI created a power that the police could not overthrow. For the first time, Baldwin saw the police intimidated, unsure of themselves. The force of the NOI convinced Baldwin that its founder deserved his attention.

Baldwin’s appreciation from a distance for Elijah Muhammad intensified after an engagement with the leader and his NOI members. As described in The Fire Next Time, Baldwin accepted a request to have dinner at the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s house. Muhammad’s presence eased Baldwin, “how his smile promised to take the burden of [Baldwin’s] life off [his] shoulders.” Baldwin recalled feelings of acceptance that compared to familial unity. Baldwin’s need for a validating father figure could, in part, account for his immediate veneration for Muhammad. Further, contact with Muhammad’s prophecy of White America’s impending comeuppance and his vision of black beauty and destiny seemed to respond to Baldwin ideas about race, grounded in the recognition of his wounded sense of self.

Muhammad uplifted a frustrated and tired population, especially in the North, where racial cruelties were ignored by White America and hidden behind a curtained ghetto. If the Southern movement opposed blatant bigotry, how could the North fight what was systematized and invisible? Muhammad responded to oppression rooted in economic inequality and internalized within a racial hierarchy that insisted Black people’s situations were spurred by their own inadequacies. He unapologetically asserted, “There is thus, by definition, no virtue in white people.” With his boldness, he refused White claims of superiority and denied their justification to his followers. White people, he asserted, were evil and their powerful reign was coming to an end. According to Baldwin, Muhammad meant every word he spoke: his discourse, though far-fetched at times, was empowering. His proclamations disavowed the truths White America professed, exposed the silent suffering of African Americans, and offered African Americans an unapologetic and unashamed confidence.

However, James Baldwin was not totally convinced. He understood Muhammad’s efficacy and even appreciated his ideology, but he could not totally align himself with their movement. First, Baldwin questioned the promised solutions of the NOI. On the car ride home from dinner, because Black Muslims always promised their guest’s safety from the “white devils,” he discussed racial solutions with his driver. He did not intend to challenge the driver’s beliefs, in fact, he felt a connection to him, and he wanted to convince himself of the feasibility of the proposed solutions. To Baldwin’s dismay, “He was held together, in short, by a dream … united with his ‘brothers’ on the basis of their color.” Baldwin hoped that Muhammad and his organization could effectively lift up Northern African Americans, but instead he saw his tactics as lacking strategy.

Baldwin disagreed with the color ideologies of the Elijah Muhammad. To the NOI, the demonized white man could never out step the lowly boundaries of his skin. Baldwin did not hold such disdain for the White race. While he felt, and witnessed, the terror campaign of the general White public, he trusted and befriended some White people. As a child, Baldwin met a young White woman: “It was certainly partly because of her, who arrived in my terrifying life so soon,

36 Ibid, 315.
37 Ibid, 323.
38 Ibid.
40 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time in Baldwin, 324, 327.
41 Ibid., 325.
42 Ibid, 331.
43 Ibid, 333.
that I never really managed to hate white people." \(^{44}\) Significantly, in *The Fire Next Time*, he reflected on the irony that after his meeting with Muhammad, he “was going to have a drink with several [of the] white devils” from whom the NOI wanted to protect him. \(^{45}\) Although similarly terrorized by racism, as were NOI members, Baldwin could not repress his doubts about their solutions.

To White America, the NOI, its policies, and beliefs were incomprehensible. White liberals could not bypass what they saw as the irrational radicalism of Black Muslims’ “dream.” This blinkered perception disallowed an understanding or even an awareness of the NOI’s Islam’s ability “to provide the African American with a pride that the Christian church had failed to furnish.” \(^{46}\) In order for White people to understand the power of the NOI, they would have had to understand the emotional truths that lay behind its Black-only ideology. This required a capacity for self-reflection that White America could not muster. White America, Baldwin believed, was in denial of its racial injustice, and in order to recognize its brutal behavior would need to face reality. \(^{47}\) Baldwin knew they were actually projecting a skewed reality, in which the White man judged before he could be judged. Escaping from the influence of this distorted reality “is to be released from the tyranny of this mirror.” \(^{48}\) White people’s dismissal of the NOI, he asserted, emphasized their disconnection from Black suffering, and thus their role as perpetrators of this suffering.

Martin Luther King Jr. believed that Elijah Muhammad’s following resulted from a latent disdain for an incurably racist nation. It is notable that King, here, mainly described the pulls of the NOI as pertaining to its political, racial, and social agenda. In his *Autobiography*, King wrote of the NOI: “Nourished by the Negro’s frustration of the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity.” \(^{49}\) He did not deeply consider or assess the ways that Islamic doctrine could have helped NOI followers overcome their racial traumas, as Christianity did for him and other African Americans in the South.

King trusted that his movement was White America’s last chance to negotiate with African Americans. He stood in between the more militant African American movement and white moderates. He described a middle ground between Black-only Nationalist movements and the complacency of the White majority. \(^{50}\) Without a nonviolent movement of protest, King asserted, the streets would flow with blood. \(^{51}\) Equally troubling, he acknowledged that if white people insisted on the status quo, and continued to see him and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), as outsiders and “rabble-rousers,” frustrated African Americans would see no other solution than the “solace and security in Black Nationalist ideologies—a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.” \(^{52}\) The two men’s description of Black Nationalism is the most cunning intersection between “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and *The Fire Next Time*. \(^{53}\)

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\(^{46}\) Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 188.


\(^{48}\) Ibid, 341.

\(^{49}\) King, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 197.

\(^{50}\) Ibid, 197.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Black Nationalism discourse stressed that people of African descent constitute a political nation. To achieve the political power for this nation required structures and resources that spoke to the community’s needs. Some Nationalists focused on the cultural components of Nationalist discourse. For example, Black people, globally, should embrace Africanness and a commitment to the African Diaspora. For the
King was a devout Christian and a preacher of Jesus. It is, therefore, not surprising that his understanding of the NOI depicted members as having lost sight of the Christian message and in search of something untainted by whiteness. Baldwin, on the other hand, had a more nuanced critique of religion, as he often even scrutinized his own beliefs and their contradictions. While he recognized that Black Muslims willfully embraced the notion that their oppressors were indeed the devils they experienced them to be, his analysis of the NOI, its ideologies, and practices dovetailed his critique of Christianity. He said, “The crowd seemed to swallow this theology with no effort—all crowds do swallow theology this way, I gather, in both sides of Jerusalem, in Istanbul, and in Rome.”

This is not to say King disavowed the NOI. Rather King understood that, if African Americans could not achieve freedom through nonviolent civil disobedience, the discourses of the NOI and Black Nationalism would there support them. And this was King’s warning. By disallowing marches and protests, White America suppressed African Americans’ anger. King recognized the need for these “latent frustrations” to find release, and if that were not done nonviolently, America would succumb to a more extreme approach.

In King and Baldwin’s understanding of nationalism, we see their preference for nonviolence, universal love, and integration. Both authors were vigilant and acute observers of the racial environment. As activists, they preferred a movement based on love and human dignity. However, they both remained mindful of the dwindling patience of their oppressed communities. King recognized that his people had been “caught up by the Zeitgeist … the United States Negro [was] moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice.”

King’s language is notable. He identified this sense of “urgency” as unstoppable. The authors depicted Nationalism within their warning to White America as a foil to demonstrate the necessity that they negotiate with the nonviolent movement.

Nonviolence

Mindful of increasing militancy within the Movement, King continued to stress the importance of nonviolence: “For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest.” To him and many nonviolent activists, nonviolence was not only a mechanism to achieve equality but more importantly a lifestyle. Both Christianity and Gandhi’s methods influenced his nonviolent lifestyle. As a leader of the struggle, King could not fathom a response to bigotry with any other forms of action than nonviolence. During his student years, before 1950, King saw armed revolt as the only solution to segregation. However, after hearing Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, speak in Philadelphia on Gandhi, he was changed. Especially impressed by Gandhi’s Salt March to the Sea and other forms of civil disobedience, King’s “skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished.” For King, Gandhi’s movement wholeheartedly mirrored Jesus’ teachings of love. King modeled his activism after Gandhi’s movement, so much so that his biographer, Dr. Lawrence Reddick, assured King that the success of his nonviolent movement would be judged upon

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56 King, Martin Luther, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 197.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 23.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 24.
the approval it gained from Gandhi and the people of India.\(^6\)

Baldwin's skepticism on this score again illuminated the differences between the North and the South. Upon hearing King preach, in 1958, about the power of love to cure the diseased bigot, Baldwin “could not help but be impressed by the success of this gospel in the face of bombs that had damaged the very church in which King preached.”\(^6\) Baldwin did not see such tendencies in the Northern church. The Southern church, with all its religious zeal, was the breeding ground for a vibrant nonviolent movement, making it difficult for the NOI or any other ideology spread to the early 1960s South. While Baldwin admired nonviolence, he also saw its pitfalls. He explained that nonviolence was effective in that the White man did not want his body or property harmed.\(^6\) In this sense, Baldwin too believed that nonviolence was not an appeal to White morality, but a centralized fight for freedom that did not damage White interests. Furthermore, he saw the limits of nonviolence. It was psychologically damaging to African Americans, because, within such a violent country, “the only time that nonviolence has been admired is when the Negroes practice it.”\(^6\) Baldwin underscored the fact that the status quo expected African Americans to operate on different social standards. In the heat of segregational vengeance, such as the violence that afflicted African American protesters in Birmingham, White America expected protesters to respond peacefully.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin agreed with King that nonviolent discourse stood between racism and explosive reactionary violence. It is significant that Baldwin and King's different roles as activists influenced their different takes on the movement. Baldwin was looking at the movement from the outside, while King was inside looking out. Baldwin was primarily a scholar and observed and analyzed the movement’s activism, though he also participated in movement conversations with exceptional activists and members of the Kennedy administration.\(^6\) His role outside of the movement mirrored the way he chose to live his life. Baldwin, Leeming quotes, saw himself as a sort of “bastard of the West.”\(^6\) This feeling emanated from his racial status in America, as well as from his home-life, and his father’s rejection of him. He constantly moved in and out of settings, which almost aided his analysis and observation of them. From an early age, he researched and wrote brilliantly. As a teenager, he desired to move out of Harlem and relocated to Greenwich Village, though he did not stop questioning the sociohistorical circumstances that Harlem’s communities experienced. At twenty-four, he moved to Paris to escape a disillusioned sense of sexuality and race that America fostered. Baldwin’s lifestyle was that of an observer, thinker, and writer. He had a profound awareness of himself and society.

According to Baldwin, his understanding of American racism deepened with his travel experience. Baldwin escaped the biases of living within the American racial problem as an expatriate in Paris. In *James Baldwin: A Biography*, David Leeming described Baldwin’s move as an effort to evade “the racial realities at home so that he could become the writer he wanted to be.”\(^6\) Baldwin removed himself from habitual American stances on class, race, and writing, freeing him to examine his country. He explained, “Once you find yourself in another civilization … you’re forced to examine your

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\(^6\) Ibid., 123.
\(^6\) Branch, *Parting The Waters*, 895.
own.” This realization reinforced Baldwin’s role in the movement as an outsider who often looked inward to seek understanding, giving him a different, and more radical perspective than that of King.

King, in contrast, acted on the frontlines of the Movement. Theorizing was secondary. Therefore, it was easier for Baldwin to play with different ideas of activism, never having to pick one to perform. To King, not only was nonviolence morally righteous, but it also brought about an effective tension. In “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he explained that nonviolent direct action catalyzed a tension in such a way “that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.”

Here, for King, there was only one feasible way to create a solution: by seeking dialogue in the South through this creative tension.

King’s impassioned nonviolent discourse instilled confidence in activists that followed the minister’s lead. In an interview with Henry Morgenthau III, Baldwin attested to King’s impressive nonviolent commitment: “Martin’s a very rare, very great man … He’s a real Christian. He really believes in nonviolence.” By 1963, activists attuned to King’s allegiance to nonviolence and to the high moral authority he had earned from that commitment. King gave African Americans hope that through a moral struggle, they could achieve their freedom. However, this hope dwindled as the immorality of White America proved unrelenting.

With the SCLC, King led nonviolent direct action in Southern cities, culminating with the Birmingham Movement in 1963. With the global media focused on what was described as “Bombingham,” King organized “a special army, with no supplies but its sincerity … no arsenal except its faith.” To the shock of news viewers, throughout the world, ruthless violence met King’s nonviolent army, blown into walls with fire hoses held by White government officials. The violence was clear and undeniable; segregationists even attacked nonviolent children. These brutalities had to be addressed.

These brutalities set the stage for King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” After being arrested in Birmingham, King saw a newspaper in which White clergymen, of various faiths, criticized his demonstrations. King answered the article with his famous “Letter.” In it, King cautioned the eight critical clergymen of the danger of their complacency. Taylor Branch argued, in his Parting the Waters, the “unexpected miracles of the Birmingham movement later transformed King’s letter from a silent cry of desperate hope to a famous pronouncement of moral triumph.” While King had tangible evidence of Southern racial realities, his argument for the necessity of nonviolent action was indisputably moral. King’s commitment to nonviolence offered him the righteous authority to respond to criticisms of his movement while exposing the racist terrorism that white people refused to confront.

King’s Dilemma

In 1961, Baldwin predicted that King’s movement would not succeed in transforming America’s toxic racial atmosphere. In a piece entitled “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King,” Baldwin explained to Harper’s Magazine readers that King’s efficacy as a leader was fading. Baldwin explicitly stated,

69 Leeming, James Baldwin: A Biography, 190.
71 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 179.
72 Ibid., 187.
73 Branch, Parting The Waters, 744.
“King has had an extraordinary effect in the Negro world ... and is now in the center of an extremely complex crossfire.” The politics of the Movement put tremendous pressure on King, bringing his successes to a standstill. White people’s belief in African American inferiority continued to mold race relations. How was King’s genuine dialogue possible with a White America that was unwilling to face its own egregious prejudice?

Furthermore, as a result of King’s lack of political pull, Baldwin anticipated a revolutionary response to King’s dilemma. He observed a “moral revolution” of the young people, as a gap emerged between “official leadership” and youthful activists: “the sons and daughters of the beleaguered bourgeoisie ... have begun a revolution in the consciousness of this country which will inexorably destroy nearly all that we now think of as a concrete and indisputable.” They would not, like King, pursue a cautious and measured response to skewed racial perceptions. Instead, they would be willing to uproot America’s social structure. The early sixties suggested to Baldwin that freedom could not be achieved through a patient and peaceful movement, but something more urgent would respond.

To King, Black Nationalism was rooted in hate. Baldwin was better able to understand its complexities because its roots started and gained popularity in the North. Baldwin understood that Elijah Muhammad’s Black Nationalism ideology brought “religious hope to the black dispossessed.” Whereas in the South, King, and activists like him, were focused on the Church. This difference between King and Baldwin showed the fundamental disparities within Northern and Southern responses to the Movement and organizational methods. In other words, the North, having more religious diversity, made room for diverse ideological responses to oppression and movement strategy. Nevertheless, the analytical Baldwin saw the benefits to nonviolence and the threat it posed to the American social structure. He predicted what King fearfully realized in a 1963 Montgomery jail cell—the African American community would find another solution to racism and inequality should nonviolence not answer their call.

**Telling Rhetoric**

King was wholeheartedly committed to the nonviolent ideology that he articulated so eloquently. Baldwin praised King for his conceptualization of the racial issue and saw his “honesty and courage ... [as] most impressive.” He believed that King’s relationship to his audience, whether in speaking or writing, was powerful because of his intimate understanding of that audience, both Black and White. These skills made “Letter from Birmingham Jail” connect to the White reader, who desperately tried to remain distanced from King’s movement.

In his “Letter” King exemplified, both a deep understanding of African Americans’ affliction, as well as a compassionate connection to his White critics. In *Parting the Waters*, Branch analyzes King’s literary strategy: “At first King denounced the white preachers for their shortcomings, as though speaking from a pulpit ... As he continued with his usual themes on the failures of the church his wrath turned slowly into a lament.” For example, after his three-

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72 Baldwin, “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King” in Baldwin, 643.
73 Ibid., 656.
74 King, The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 197.
75 Ibid., 656.
77 Baldwin, James Baldwin to Martin Luther King, Jr. 6 May 1960, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.
78 Baldwin, “The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King” in Baldwin, 644.
hundred-word explanation of why Black people can no longer “Wait,” he did not chastise the white oppressor. Rather, he used his eloquence to make his struggle poignant and vivid. He even sympathized with White people for their inability to viscerally relate to the Black struggle, offering them a common ground to meet—Christian brotherhood. As Baldwin certified, King had a gentle and intimate way of relating to his readers, one that transcended racial tension and frustration so to give hope to a new, loving future.

Baldwin’s rhetoric was less emollient. First, it is important to recognize that Baldwin did not have to cater his words to the sensitivities of his readers. King, as a figurehead of the Black Freedom Struggle, needed to maintain a certain political correctness and soften his lament to provide comfort to White listeners and satisfy White standards of acceptability. As Baldwin explained, the White community was not able to take accountability for the pangs that afflicted African Americans. King’s job was to negotiate for Black Freedom with the White power structure. It was a delicate balance, to speak the truth of his people without offending White people and their denial, which would likely cause them leave the conversation altogether. While Baldwin rose to acclaim, especially after The Fire Next Time released, he did not have to worry about maintaining ties with the Kennedy administration at this time, whereas King did. The necessity that King stay within the bounds of their expectations became evident years later when he spoke against President Johnson’s stance on Vietnam and was consequently shunned by the administration.

Baldwin, with no such ties to protect, could speak with unapologetic urgency about the plight of Black America, as he did in a heated confrontation with Robert Kennedy that stunned the Attorney General.

His penchant for prophecy in the apocalyptic sense is visible at the end of The Fire Next Time’s longer essay, “Down at the Cross.” At a time of explosive crossfire, Baldwin gave one solution:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country … If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: G-d gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time.

His ominous words seared the consciousness of his readers, offering a fearful ultimatum. Here, Baldwin circumnavigated the context of his book. He explicated the racial experience of the Harlem “Negro,” and warned of the desperate methods that this “Negro” was taking on to validate blackness. However, he still offered hope. The conscious members of both races must sensually and wholeheartedly, the way lovers intimately come together, expand their consciousness. He warned that if this did not happen the racial injustices that have pervaded history would be replaced by a “fire” that would smother the earth, like G-d’s flood. Baldwin

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81 King, Martin Luther, Jr., The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 198.
82 Ibid., 204.
84 King, Martin Luther, Jr., The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 342.
85 Branch, Parting The Waters, 812.
86 Baldwin, The Fire Next Time in Baldwin, 346.
does not sugarcoat his depiction of the race issue or his depiction of what would happen should it go unrecognized. Instead, the writer builds upon his readers’ fears, promising their fulfillment should they not act on his word. By calling upon biblical imagery, both authors depict the need for White America to act in the interests of Black people as if it were viewed under the scrutiny of divine judgment. They warned that should these individuals not heed Baldwin and King’s call for equality and freedom the consequences would resemble the wrath of a higher power.

Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, took on the active role of the omniscient narrator. He delved into a holy warning, invoking in “preacher-fashion the image of cosmic apocalypse.” These essays, published in magazines widely read by white people, transcended the cultural marginalization of the black voice, making him an international writer. While King offered an olive branch to his white audience, a vision of social justice and inclusive community achieved through moral action, Baldwin invoked another kind of biblical imagery, that of the fiery trial.

**Final Thoughts**

A comparison of James Baldwin and Martin Luther King offers an understanding of the Movement and its complexities. Baldwin, a Northern-born African American, was more attuned to the complexities of Black Nationalism, the oppression of internalized racism, as well as the complacency of the White North and its more insidious racism. As a Movement outsider and thinker, he was able to conceptualize and compare King’s tactics to those of other leaders and activists. His experiences as a queer Black man, world traveler, and international writer helped him to develop a distinctive perspective on the Movement. In *The Fire Next Time*, one of his less radical pieces, Baldwin illustrated the Northern Ghetto through his experiences in Harlem. He spoke of African American’s internalization of white understandings of Blackness, as seen in his father’s self-hatred. Baldwin understood why the NOI was able to heal this wound in way that the Northern church could not.

In contrast to Baldwin, Martin Luther King’s experiences in a loving nuclear family and uplifting, soul empowering church provided the foundations for his embrace of love, nonviolence, and human dignity. To King, Christianity offered strength and justification to go on despite racial cruelties. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he forthrightly expressed love for his White Christian brothers and sisters. The sincerity of his hope, expressed in this letter and throughout his leadership, garnered a large following of American activists who trusted his guidance and the power of nonviolent civil disobedience.

King’s vision was perceived as inclusive. His style in his “Letter” was famously syncretic, fusing disparate sources (Socrates, Gandhi, Thoreau, Niebuhr) with the biblical cadences of the social gospel tradition of his beloved father. Baldwin’s imagination, shaped by his experience of Harlem rather than Atlanta, and by a more fraught conflict with his tormented father, was apocalyptic. His best essays, Phillip Lopate has observed, end not with visions of justice and harmony, but with powerful opposites in unresolved tension with each other. Harlem and Atlanta, North and South, outsider and insider—the two men were themselves opposites in many ways. But they admired and respected each other, played complementary roles in the history of their time, and produced works of such eloquence and power that they have transcended the particular circumstances of 1963 and become

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87 Lopate, “Teaching James Baldwin,” 185.
permanent contributions to American literature.

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