MANCHESTER 1824
Manchester University Press

ESSAY

# "A Kind of Joy": Laughing and Grinning through "Sonny's Blues"

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## Abstract

The protagonists in James Baldwin's 1957 short story "Sonny's Blues" are constantly smiling and laughing. The story's narrator notices these gestures and utilizes them to grasp at clarity when clarity seems out of reach. This article examines the narrator's focus on this duo of facial expressions which reliably denote positive emotion. The relationship we maintain between our smiles and our laughter structures many of the narrator's interactions with the story's hero. More though, this relationship between smiles, laughter, and a *kind* of joy resembles the relationship Baldwin has described between the blues and the world this genre of music depicts.

**Keywords:** affect, emotion, nonverbal communication, humor, African American

*James Baldwin Review*, Volume 8, 2022, © The Authors. Published by Manchester University Press and The University of Manchester Library
http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/JBR.8.3
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James Baldwin's 1957 short story "Sonny's Blues" is about the blues. Which is to say, it is about *joy*—about the joys we expect from life and the joys that same life teaches us to stop expecting. In his 1964 essay "The Uses of the Blues," Baldwin says as much:

> Now, I am claiming a great deal for the blues; I'm using them as a metaphor—I might have titled this, for example, "The Uses of Anguish" or "The Uses of Pain." … I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. Now joy is a true state, it is a reality; it has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk of happiness, which is not a real state and does not really exist.[1]

Critics have long examined the blues as a metaphor in Baldwin's story—as a stand-in for suffering and survival, both of the main characters and of African Americans overall. The blues are not just a genre of music or an emblem of fortitude; they are a mode of storytelling.[2] "Sonny's Blues" intends, in the words of one critic, "to evoke aural responses"—this same critic notes the narrator's half dozen references to listening and hearing.[3] Another critic has pointed to the broader soundscape, the whistles, screams, and jukeboxes that abound in the story.[4] But if we attend to the metaphor Baldwin presents in his later essay—the blues as the expression and acceptance of an anguish that is productive of joy—then one cannot help noticing the prevalence of a different sound. Has anyone noticed how often in this story someone laughs?

I have counted at least ten separate references to laughter. And it is not just laughter either. Characters are constantly smiling and grinning. After Sonny is released from jail, the only thing the narrator recognizes from the baby brother he once knew is his smile. Sonny begins his most confessional speech to his brother by smiling, and one of the last things the narrator notices about his brother before the scene ends is that Sonny is now "not smiling at all."[5] These are dynamic, multivalent gestures. At times they deride and repulse, at others they intimate sadness or evoke youthful hope. There is—to use Baldwin's phrase quoted above—"a reality" to them.

In everyday life, laughter and smiles enact a multitude of functions—they might relieve a stranger's nervousness or flatter a lover's pride; they might punctuate a statement or signal one's appreciation of a joke. These gestures can perform such feats, they can mean so much in so many different settings, because we *recognize* them.[6] In the literature on nonverbal communication and emotion, smiles and laughter are two of the most reliably identified facial expressions.[7] It is this reliability that makes them such powerful forms of extralinguistic language. Whenever someone's laugh seems other than we expect—when it seems violent instead of mirthful, sardonic rather than innocent—we do not necessarily give it a different name.[8] Laughter and smiles support all manner of qualifiers and still retain their identity. It is the reason why Baldwin's narrator calls his pupils' guffaws laughter even if he perceives an emotional valence that is antithetical to the sentiment most

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readily associated with this gesture: "It was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children."[9]

"God knows why," interjects the narrator. But there is little mystery here. No matter how many times life disabuses us of the expectation that we only laugh to express joy, we cannot help continuing to expect something indicative of joyfulness. We intuit an inherent, indissoluble connection to positive emotion.[10] When someone's ha ha or hee hee mocks us, when someone else's smile teases us rather than sets us at ease, it does so because the positive emotion inherent to the gesture suddenly seems to exclude us. In situations like these, the gesture evokes, in Baldwin's words, "a *kind* of joy"—an ideal of positive emotion that withstands as well as acknowledges the whims of circumstance. A grin or guffaw evokes an ideal of positive emotion even when—especially when—it is evoking that emotion's absence.

In a similar way that Baldwin is not interested in the blues as a mere opiate for suffering but as a mirror reflecting it—as *a reality*—laughter in "Sonny's Blues" neither railroads over pain nor accepts it unquestioningly; it acknowledges it—the "acceptance of this anguish" and "the expression of it" too. This is not to heap one metaphor atop another—it is not that laughter in this story represents the blues in the way that the blues represents, in Baldwin's essay, anguish or pain. In Baldwin's story, laughter emphasizes the perspective readers share with the story's narrator. As gestures that imply but do not necessarily express joy, laughter and smiles set up expectations. As such, they often serve as focal points for understanding. Like the story's narrator, readers are being asked to find something redeeming in Sonny; like Sonny's brother, readers are asked to make sense of another person with whom they might have increasingly little in common but for whom they might care deeply. When all other means fail, Sonny's brother looks to laughter, to the grins and frowns that betray our joys and our hopes for joy, in order to make sense of a man he never really understood. If laughter is a *reality* in Baldwin's story, it is because, like the blues, it enacts an expectation for something that might be denied to audiences. In the way that the blues often delivers joy precisely because audiences were expecting anguish from it, so laughter often delivers something other than joy precisely because we were expecting nothing less from it.

In the story's opening, the narrator spots a newspaper article recounting Sonny's arrest. This is just as his little brother is becoming, as he says, "real to me again."[11] Then the narrator hears his students' mirth outside the classroom, which strikes him:

> for perhaps the first time. It was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children … It was disenchanted … Perhaps I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself.[12]

The irony of this moment—at least for the sake of my argument—is that this scene privileges listening above sight. The narrator does not see this laughter. He

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*hears* it, or at least assumes he does in the way the story implies that truly *hearing* something means understanding it on its own terms—a theme which moves to the fore in the final scene at the jazz club.[13] What emerges from the narrator's observation is a set of expectations regarding youth and its relationship with joy. As though by admitting that one associates joyous laughter with children, one is admitting the relationship's veracity. By wondering—"God knows"—why we continue to connect joyous laughter to youth, the narrator is implying a long backstory of contradictory evidence. He has witnessed—he is witnessing yet again—many examples disproving the truism. This conflict, between what one expects and what one *continues expecting*, despite having been disabused of one's naivety, will play out upon the faces of the characters that define Sonny to his older brother. At this moment in the story, the narrator need merely "listen" to make a judgment that condemns a group of pupils' presumed innocence. As the story progresses, what the narrator sees on the faces around him will begin to disabuse him of many a hasty assumption.

In the very next scene, the narrator stumbles upon an old acquaintance of his brother, whom he has never liked and regrets running into now. When the narrator asks him why his brother was the one who got arrested for having drugs instead of him, the acquaintance "grinned." "It made him repulsive," says the narrator, "and it also brought to mind what he'd looked like as a kid."[14] More than once the narrator will recognize a lost childhood in someone's smile, including Sonny's. In the same scene with the childhood acquaintance, the narrator is taken to a bar where a barmaid's mirth earns his attention: "And I watched her face as she laughingly responded to something someone said to her … When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore."[15] When the narrator meets his brother after his release from prison, he admits that time behind bars has changed Sonny: "He looked very unlike my baby brother. Yet, when he smiled … the baby brother I'd never known looked out from the depths of this private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light."[16]

It is not just that these gestures serve as the narrator's means for identifying people, though they most definitely do—in the short dialogue recounting the narrator's first meeting with Sonny after prison, the narrator notes his baby brother smiling, grinning, or laughing four times. The narrator does not merely utilize smiles and laughs as identifying gestures—as we all do—he also identifies a communal relationship among disparate people and their distinct expressions. The youthfulness he spies in the smile of a weary barmaid or an ex-con is not an authentic youthfulness; it is an ideal—an ideal of joyous, innocent youthfulness—an image of what should have been, but maybe never was. In these smiles and laughs, the narrator recognizes a universal experience denied. As the two brothers return to Harlem just after Sonny's release, the narrator notes: "It came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind."[17]

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Researchers have called smiles and laughs a form of self-betrayal.[18] Often one is revealing far more than one realizes about one's intentions, judgments, and presumptions, simply because an upturn has formed at the corners of the mouth. Likewise, in "Sonny's Blues" there is a kind of honesty inherent to these gestures. However, I do not want to imply that the narrator simply understands each smile he notices, especially when he notices it upon the face of someone whom he is struggling to make sense of. This is not about extralinguistic language making up for the failures of linguistic communication. This is about the ways the narrator fumbles toward understanding and, in the process, toward recognizing some kind of shared experience.[19]

One sees this fumbling on display when the narrator's mother tells him about his murdered uncle. As she is beginning the story, the narrator notices that "she smiled in a way that made me feel she was in pain."[20] Notice the phrasing: "*made me* feel she was in pain." The emphasis lies on the effect of the gesture upon the listener; the emphasis underscores the gesture's ability to enact an understanding of another's experience, not necessarily to communicate some straightforward statement about another's interiority.[21] After the mother finishes telling the story, the narrator promises her he will take care of his baby brother. Then he notices another smile: "My mother smiled *as though* she was amused at something she saw on my face."[22] Again, the phrasing highlights the narrator's assumptions, in this case regarding the other person's assumptions about *him*. There is a miniature drama on display here, one which resembles the larger drama of "Sonny's Blues." It is as though the conversation ends with a series of blank spaces, which the narrator is fumbling to fill in the only way he can, with his assumptions regarding not just what he has heard said but what he has seen displayed.

This reliance on facial expressions continues in the very next scene, in which the narrator "trie[s] to find out something about [Sonny]."[23] In this conversation, Sonny reveals his desire to be a musician, and the narrator reveals that he disapproves. When Sonny says he thinks he might be able to make it as a pianist, the narrator *frowns*—"I'd never played the role of the oldest brother quite so seriously before," he says.[24] Notice the connection made between this anti-smile and adulthood and its accompanying sense of responsibility. Notice, as well, the way the narrator links his responsibility as an adult, not so much to wisdom or experience, as to *uncertainty*: "I sensed myself in this presence of something I didn't really know how to handle, didn't understand. *So* I made my frown a little deeper."[25]

This uncertainty will soon butt heads with Sonny's insistent smiling and laughter. Just as his brother frowns and asks him what kind of musician he wants to be, Sonny replies, "How many kinds do you think there are?"[26] Sonny's response is accompanied by a grin. The question and the facial expression prompt the narrator's injunction to "Be *serious.*"[27] At this, Sonny laughs, throws his head back, and says "I *am* serious."[28] That this would exasperate the narrator seems obvious. That this exasperation would come as a response to his brother's laughter, perhaps even more so. The narrator cannot finish what he has to say before Sonny is laughing

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again—"For Christ's *sake*, Sonny!" he interjects.[29] Part of the narrator's exasperation has to do with the way Sonny's laughter seems to diminish the sense of importance the narrator ascribes to his statements—"I was furious," he says, "because I knew he was laughing at me"—but part of the narrator's anger also derives from his uncertainty about his brother's laughter—"because I knew he was laughing at me and I didn't know why."[30] He *recognizes* that this is laughter, which is akin to, not just identifying the gesture on the face and in the voice, but also intuiting what the gesture is supposed to mean. However, the narrator does not recognize the laugh's cause. In other words, he relies on the gesture in order to identify an absence, in order to understand that which he does *not* understand about the exchange, a remarkable feat, really, for a mere laugh to perform.

We all do this. Conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, and philosophy of language have long confirmed the extent to which we rely on extralinguistic signs in everyday interaction.[31] We see this in action throughout "Sonny's Blues": "He paused," the narrator says of his brother, in the same conversation from the previous paragraph, "he paused, looking hard at me, as though his eyes would help me to understand, and then gestured helplessly, as though perhaps his hand would help."[32] In this respect, smiles are no different from any other hand gesture or facial expression. So much of the story's drama of miscommunication happens via nonverbal cues, cues which hint at a shared experience, even when the possibility of mutual understanding seems, at least in this moment in time, unlikely: "I just looked at him," the narrator says, once again in the same conversation, "and I was probably frowning a real frown this time."[33] The willed gesture from earlier—"So I made my frown a little deeper," as though the narrator were just playing the part of an older brother—is replaced by a gesture the narrator intuits as more authentic, as though he is no longer merely playing a role but has now fully internalized what that role entails. Notice how much more certain the narrator is now, if not of Sonny's intentions at least of his own ability to communicate his intentions to his brother via something as straightforward as a frown.

What we recognize about a gesture is not its meaning; what we recognize is our own assumptions about its meaning. This is especially the case when the gesture eludes us. Nowhere is this more evident than during the conversation in which the two brothers discuss their different ideas on how to withstand suffering. Throughout the exchange, language and sound—ironically enough, given the story's culminating scene—prove inadequate in resolving the brothers' differences. The narrator begins posing his questions with a voice "very ugly, full of contempt and anger."[34] Everything he says after, and everything he hears his brother say, only leads to disagreement. And yet, as the conversation proceeds, one notices the narrator grasping at clarity, via what he sees on his brother's face. Sonny, he writes, "looked at me with great, troubled eyes, as though, in fact, he hoped his eyes would tell me things he could never say otherwise."[35] As in the scene earlier with the mother, that *as though* signals the narrator's own assumptions, from which he believes there might be some clarity to be found.[36] What the narrator often learns from these signals, though, is how inadequate his assumptions about them prove

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to be. When the narrator admits that he cannot tell if Sonny is answering his questions or pursuing his own thoughts independently, he writes: "His face didn't tell me … He frowned and smiled."[37] This is pure description sans interpretation—the contradiction of smiling and frowning appearing simultaneously speaks volumes. This is the narrator attempting to use Sonny's expressions to understand something about his brother, and failing.

By the end of the conversation, after the narrator has continued to recognize—and failed at times to understand—Sonny's smiles, after Sonny's "mocking look" has confirmed that something "stood between us, forever," the narrator can only attempt to bridge the gap that his silence cleaved open by "*trying* to laugh."[38] It is as though the narrator were incapable of not allowing his expression to betray him, as though the laugh were wholly incapable of being willed from a place of such insincerity. And a moment after this happens, just as the absent sincerity of this laugh impresses itself upon the narrator, Sonny says, "'Sometimes you'll do *anything* to play, even cut your mother's throat.' He laughed and looked at me. 'Or your brother's.' Then he sobered. 'Or your own.'"[39]

That the narrator intuits Sonny's laugh here as genuine—evidenced in his describing its appearance matter-of-factly, without the need to qualify it—punctuates Sonny's statement with a haunting sentiment. How the narrator struggled—and failed—to lighten the gravity of his own statement with a laugh. How easily Sonny laughs, though, while uttering a most distressing pronouncement.[40]

Laughter communicates *nonseriousness*.[41] Its connection to positive emotion intimates a diminished gravity, implying that the situation at hand will not prove irredeemably consequential in the long term. Hence why one finds laughter so often in conversations about distressing subject matter—there is documented evidence of grieving widows and hospital patients addressing their pain via humor and laughter.[42] In the conversation cited above, laughter highlights the disconnect between two brothers. The narrator writes that he *tries* to laugh, acknowledging and assuming that the attempt and subsequent failure to do so must have been recognizable to his brother, as though acknowledging that his brother has seen his failed attempt not to seem so serious. What a betrayal, then, of the narrator's understanding of just how serious his statement is, of how worried he is that this seriousness will repulse Sonny. Meanwhile Sonny does manage to laugh when he says that he would cut his relatives' throats if that is what it took to play jazz. The gesture would seem to undercut the statement's menace with its hint at irony. At the same time, though, the laugh heightens the statement's earnestness, as if to say, "Yes, I would cut your throat for the sake of jazz, and it would not mean that much to me either."

Laughter does not inscribe joyfulness onto a situation, it inserts an expectation of joyfulness into a situation. The situation then makes of this expectation what it will. The sudden intimation of joy can be reassuring in a sad situation. But it can also come across as worrisome or disheartening, as equivocal and transparent within the very same conversation, depending on the perspective of the person

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involved. The reality of which the blues sings is neither reassuring nor pessimistic, essentially. It is demonstrative of the nuances inherent to circumstances, the way a conversation may turn unexpectedly on the appearance of a gesture, the way the very same gesture may be perceived by the parties involved to turn the conversation in diametrically opposed directions.

In the title character's longest speech, Sonny telegraphs his intentions with his facial expressions (or at least, so the narrator assumes). Sonny initiates the speech by sitting down on the sofa, looking away, and smiling. "I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be," he says, "Didn't know anybody could be."[43] Sonny interrupts his explanation for leaving Harlem "with a small, still smile."[44] Obviously, Sonny's brother notices these expressions, otherwise he could not have narrated them. Nonetheless, he feels the need to say that he "watched [Sonny's] face," which a moment after smiles yet again; this time, though, "the smile was sorrowful."[45] The nuances inherent to these displays are multivalent and subtle. Does the first smile initiate things with a sense of welcome—a bit of non-seriousness to invite his brother, finally, to *hear* him? That second smile feels almost like a kind of resting place, as though reassuring his brother of having ended up some place his brother might himself one day reach, albeit with a little effort. That third smile, though, how heavy it must seem to the narrator, considering that he then says, "But it was sorrowful." How much seriousness is the narrator assuming, how forthright does he expect his brother to be, when the narrator then notes, right after Sonny says "You're my brother," that Sonny then "looked straight at me, *and* not smiling at all"?[46] The inclusion of this particular conjunction implies that the narrator's expectation is being met. The conjunction coming at the tail end of the statement implies a kind of confirmation of the statement's truth, as though the narrator were affirming his understanding of Sonny's statement with an understanding of Sonny's facial expression. Whether he is right to assume as much is beside the point; what we know is what Sonny's brother assumes, and what he assumes owes as much to Sonny's extralinguistic signs as to anything his brother says.

After the previous exchange of attempted laughs and sardonic quips, after the previous moments in the story, in which Sonny's roommates mock the narrator with their laughter and Sonny's own gestures seem to be frowning and smiling simultaneously, much has changed. It is at this moment, just after the narrator hears Sonny call him "brother," all the while noticing the absence of a smile, that he writes, "Yes … yes I understand that."[47] A newfound clarity seems to be emerging. It is not that the narrator understands his brother's smiles even when he fails to understand his brother's sentiments. It is not that the narrator fails to comprehend the rationale for Sonny's worldview but succeeds at intimating the rationale motivating his momentary gestures. It is that the act of noticing these gestures—and their glaring absences—is a prelude for noticing later on. What the narrator learns to hear in Sonny's performance in the following scene is foreshadowed by what the narrator begins to see in Sonny's face earlier.

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The culminating scene at the jazz club proceeds via more of these gestures. Sonny introduces his fellow musician Creole with a grin.[48] The narrator recognizes Creole's sincere appreciation for Sonny along these lines: "It was clear that [Creole] was glad to meet me *there*, for Sonny's sake. And he smiled."[49] The other musician who greets them outside the club is described as a "cheerful-looking man … his teeth gleaming like a lighthouse and his laugh coming up out of him like the beginning of an earthquake."[50] These are more than authentic gestures. They are, for the narrator at least, revelatory. As Steven C. Tracy has pointed out, the lighthouse comparison references a well-known blues lyric: "My baby got teeth like a lighthouse on the sea / And every time she smile she throws her light on me."[51] The lyric, in Tracy's estimation, brings together

> the brightness of a potential partner's smile with the permanence, guidance, protection, safety, and comfort of the lighthouse on an unpredictable, illusory, threatening, and uncomfortable sea, and asserting not only that these feelings are not only regularly bestowed, but exclusively bestowed upon the singer.[52]

Baldwin references this line more implicitly earlier in the story, when the narrator meets Sonny after his release from prison and notices his smile: "He looked very unlike my baby brother. Yet, when he smiled … the baby brother I'd never known looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light."[53]

I said these are more than mere *authentic* gestures, for authenticity implies some transcendent permanence. These gestures bring to life something more interesting—an ideal of authenticity that would allow another person to connect the version of the brother they knew in childhood with the version in adulthood they are currently attempting to understand—to understand in the way these musicians seem to understand Sonny. "And it turned out that everyone at the bar *knew* Sonny."[54] If before the narrator conceives of his baby brother as someone lost, waiting to be "coaxed into the light," at this point the light comes across less as a destination the narrator defines for his baby brother, and more as a journey the narrator is learning to take part in along with his baby brother.

Soon the narrator enters the club and takes a seat, and he begins looking: "Then I watched them, Creole, and the little black man, and Sonny and the others … watching them laughing and gesturing and moving about."[55] When Sonny is introduced on stage, the narrator notices that his baby brother "could have cried, but neither hiding it nor showing it, riding it like a man, grinned."[56] Notice the narrator's definition for his brother's grin: *riding it like a man*. I do not think it is a stretch to interpret this simile along the lines of Baldwin's definition of the blues—as an acceptance of anguish turned into triumph. One-and-a-half paragraphs later, as the performance is in full swing, the narrator begins his long discussion of music and how rarely "people ever really hear it."[57] This is the moment in which he elaborates on what the musician undergoes in performance, how "the man who

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creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it … What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant too, for that same reason."[58]

The narrator arrives at this interpretation as much by hearing as by seeing the performance. The very next line is this: "I just watched Sonny's face. His face was troubled, he was working hard."[59] Throughout the performance, the narrator makes it clear that he is learning to hear Sonny's blues by watching Sonny's face and how it interacts with those of the other performers—"Yet, watching Creole's face as they neared the end of the first set, I had the feeling that something had happened, something I hadn't heard."[60] A moment later, "and Sonny was part of the family again. I could tell from his face."[61] The narrator is interpreting the performance in a manner similar to Baldwin's interpretation in "The Uses of the Blues," and he is doing so by reading the writing on the performers' faces:

> For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new … And this tale, *according to that face*, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation.[62]

And all of this culminates in—what else?—"Then it was over. Creole and Sonny let out their breath, both soaking wet, and *grinning.*"[63]

Earlier in the story, when Sonny kicks the narrator out of the apartment he shares in the village, in what is perhaps the most obvious moment of emotional disconnect between the two brothers, a laugh is heard from inside. As a result, the narrator admits, "The tears came to my eyes. I started down the steps, whistling to keep from crying."[64] This last phrase modifies another classic blues line: "When you see me laughing / I'm laughing to keep from crying." The line provided Langston Hughes with the title and epigraph to his 1952 short story collection. For Hughes, the lyric was "a response to the harshness of the lives of African Americans … [it] represented the indomitable spirit of the folk."[65] In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin transforms the line by replacing "laughing" with "whistling." While in the original lyric laughter withstands tears, here a form of music resists the tears brought on by someone else's laughter. Baldwin transforms the line, then, by transforming laughter into a private melody and this melody into the resistance to public mockery. Laughter provokes the blues and is replaced by a song sung in order to overcome the blues. In other words, in Baldwin's inversion of this lyric, laughter parallels the blues as both an emotion and as an aesthetic. One could say the same about Baldwin's use of laughter throughout "Sonny's Blues."

The sentiment a laugh or a smile provokes can be harsh or reassuring, as derisive as the laughter of Sonny's roommates, as triumphant as the grin Sonny produces at the end of his performance. Each version of these sentiments is effected by, once again in Baldwin's words, "a kind of joy"—a *kind* of joy, rather than just joy, because, if you define the emotion the way Baldwin does, then "joy is a true

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state, it is a reality." Which is to say, it can only be called a kind of triumph if one is triumphing over something. This requires the something in question to be a part of the presentation. This requires that we interpret that laugh or grin, not as a rejection of anguish but—as in Baldwin's interpretation of the blues—as an acceptance of it. There is no reason ever to interpret someone's laugh or smile—as much as the whistle they make or the music they play—as something indicative of disenchantment or joyousness, not unless one notices an absent joy from the disenchanted gesture or a facile contentedness in the joyous performance. Both interpretations imply that the observer is beginning to recognize something more than just their own assumptions within the face of the other person, that an implicated bystander is struggling to make sense to themselves of their own version of a communal reality.

## Notes

1 James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues" (1964), in *The Cross of Redemption*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon, 2010), pp. 200–1.

2 Sonny, in fact, does not play the blues in the story; he plays jazz. For more on the relationship between the blues, jazz, and Baldwin's mode of storytelling in "Sonny's Blues," see Tracey Sherard, "Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's 'Blues Text' as Intracultural Critique," *African American Review*, 32:4 (1998), 691–705. For more on the blues as a metaphor in this story, see Eva Kowalska, "Troubled Reading: 'Sonny's Blues' and Empathy," *Literator*, 36:1 (2015), 1–6, and John M. Reilly, "'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 4:2 (1970), 56–60.

3 See Steven C. Tracy, "Sonny in the Dark: Jazzing the Blues Spirit and the Gospel Truth in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues,'" *James Baldwin Review*, 1 (2015), 165.

4 See Maleda Belilgne, "Sonic Living: Space and the Speculative in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues,'" *James Baldwin Review*, 4 (2018), 45–62. Trudier Harris's article is a notable exception in the literature on "Sonny's Blues" in that it emphasizes the visual over the aural. Harris argues that the story positions both its narrator and its readers as voyeurs: "We watch characters being shut out of one another's lives even as we are titillated by the events of those lives." In making this argument, she speaks of *watching* as a figurative activity, which implies the narrator's distance and detachment. I, however, am stressing the narrator's interest and curiosity. See Trudier Harris, "Watchers Watching Watchers: Positioning Characters and Readers in Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' and Morrison's 'Recitatif,'" in Lovalerie King and Lynn Orilla Scott (eds.), *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 104.

5 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," in Alison Booth and Kelly J. Mays (eds.), *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 82.

6 As Provine puts it, speaking of the anatomical uniformity of laughter across subjects, "If there was not some invariance in laughter, we would not recognize that people were laughing, and laughter would be useless as a social signal." Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York, Penguin, 2001), p. 63.

7 Even Lisa Feldman Barrett, who has made a career arguing against essential connections between facial expressions and specific emotions, admits as much: "Smiling faces are easily and effortlessly categorized as *happy* and show the largest cross-cultural

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accuracy rates." Lisa Feldman Barrett, "Are Emotions Natural Kinds?," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1:1 (2006), 39–40.

8 There are exceptions of course—the *rictus* or *cackle* being two examples. In my own research, though, I have found that writers will sooner qualify a laugh with an unusual adjective rather than revert to a new name altogether. For more on this, see James Nikopoulos, *The Stability of Laughter: The Problem of Joy in Modernist Literature* (New York, Routledge, 2019), especially chapter 8, "Individuality, In Practice."

9 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 64.

10 For a review of the research demonstrating laughter's connection to positive affect, see James Nikopoulos, "The Stability of Laughter," *HUMOR. International Journal of Humor Research*, 30:1 (2017), 1–21. For more on laughter's connection to childhood, see Nikopoulos, *The Stability of Laughter*, pp. 86–9.

11 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 63.

12 *Ibid*., p. 64.

13 Golden argues that the narrator is unwilling to understand Sonny for who he is: "The narrator takes action to help his brother, but only on the narrator's terms; he attempts to make Sonny like himself." I would contend that "Sonny's Blues" depicts the narrator's trajectory away from this tendency and that the jazz club finale marks the turning point where the narrator begins to understand—to *hear*—his brother for who he is, not just for who the narrator wants him to be. Timothy Joseph Golden, "Epistemic Addiction: Reading 'Sonny's Blues' with Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 26:3 (2012), 556.

14 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 65.

15 *Ibid*., p. 66. Byerman has emphasized the visual aspect of this episode with the barmaid. Like Harris—and unlike me—he stresses detachment over connection, as though describing what one sees were akin to admitting disinterest: "Rather than listen to the conversation he is directly involved in, the narrator observes one he cannot possibly hear. In the process, he can distance himself by labeling the woman he sees. He is thereby at once protected from and superior to the situation." Keith E. Byerman, "Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in 'Sonny's Blues,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 19:4 (1982), 368.

16 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 68.

17 *Ibid*., p. 69.

18 Reginald B. Adams Jr., Daniel C. Dennett, and Matthew M. Hurley, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2011), p. 259.

19 The culminating moment of this recognition occurs in the jazz club at the end of the story. As Kowalska puts it, Sonny "allows, in a profound moment of enlightenment in a darkened cellar nightclub, his brother to feel that he can make sense of not just his own suffering and joy, but of these emotional experiences on a universal human level." Kowalska, "Troubled Reading," p. 3.

20 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 71.

21 According to Ruth Leys, modern research on emotion and nonverbal communication is split between those who believe gestures reliably depict interior affective states and those who claim that gestures depict intentional behavior associated with social motives. For more on Leys' views and a rebuttal of them, see Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), and James Nikopoulos, "Why Can't Science Be More Like History: A Response to Ruth Leys' *The*

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*Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 75 (2019), 57–61.

22 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 72, my emphasis.
23 *Ibid*.
24 *Ibid*., p. 73.
25 *Ibid*., my emphasis.
26 *Ibid*.
27 *Ibid*.
28 *Ibid*.
29 *Ibid*.
30 *Ibid*.
31 Good starting points in the literature are Alan J. Fridlund, *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View* (San Diego, Academic Press, 1994); Judith A. Hall, Terrence G. Horgan, and Mark L. Knapp, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (Boston, Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2014); and, especially when it comes to smiles and laughter, Provine, *Laughter*, and Philip J. Glenn, *Laughter in Interaction* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).
32 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 73.
33 *Ibid*.
34 *Ibid*., p. 79.
35 *Ibid*.
36 *Ibid*.
37 *Ibid*., p. 80.
38 *Ibid*., my emphasis.
39 *Ibid*., p. 81.
40 In Baldwin's earlier novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), the protagonist's mother "tried—and failed—to smile" at his birth father during her visit to him in prison. Baldwin utilizes laughter in this novel—as well as in many of his other works (see, for example, note 42)—in many of the same ways I discuss in this article, as an evocation of lost childhood, as a form of self-betrayal, as an acutely distressing mode of mockery. See James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York, Penguin, 1991), p. 290. Laughter's prominence in Baldwin's oeuvre should perhaps come as no surprise, considering his avowal in "Autobiographical Notes": "Otherwise, I love to eat and drink … and I love to argue with people who do not disagree with me too profoundly, and I love to laugh." See James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2012), p. 45. I chose to focus on "Sonny's Blues" because of the way its use of the blues parallels laughter's relationship to joy and thereby thematizes how laughter functions as nonverbal communication.
41 See Glenn, *Laughter in Interaction*.
42 For the former, see George Bonanno, "Laughter during Bereavement," *Bereavement Care*, 18:2 (1999), 19–22; for the latter, see Glenn, *Laughter in Interaction*, p. 62. A relevant example of this in Baldwin's work can be found in his later novel *Just Above My Head* (1979), when the narrator strikes up a conversation on Christmas with a bartender, who intersperses laughter into an otherwise sad story: "'My old man split when I was a little fellow,' says the bartender, 'and my mama—well, she give me to her mama, you dig?' And he laughed. 'So I sort of had to make it best I could. My grandmama passed away last year—so—now, well, I'm all alone on Christmas,' and he laughed again.

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I didn't know what to say. His laugh, his manner, rejected pity, but: 'That's too bad,' I said." See James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (New York, Penguin, 1994), p. 265.

43 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 81.
44 *Ibid*.
45 *Ibid*., pp. 81, 82.
46 *Ibid*., p. 82, my emphasis.
47 *Ibid*.
48 *Ibid*.
49 *Ibid*.
50 *Ibid*.
51 Tracy, "Sonny in the Dark," p. 173.
52 *Ibid*., p. 173.
53 Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," p. 68.
54 *Ibid*., p. 82, my emphasis.
55 *Ibid*.
56 *Ibid*.
57 *Ibid*., p. 83.
58 *Ibid*.
59 *Ibid*.
60 *Ibid*.
61 *Ibid*., p. 84.
62 *Ibid*., my emphasis.
63 *Ibid*., p. 82, my emphasis.
64 *Ibid*., p. 77.
65 See Steven C. Tracy, "Langston Hughes and Aunt Hager's Children's Blues Performance: 'Six-Bits Blues,'" in Cheryl R. Ragar and John Edgar Tidwell (eds.), *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 22.

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