



# The Black Intellectual Tradition and the Great Conversation

with Christine Perrin, Dr. Angel Parham, Danielle Bennette Dukes, Dr. Kathryn Smith

Panel 4: Discussion of  
"Sonny's Blues" by  
James Baldwin

## Outline:

### Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

- **Christine Perrin (5:46):** Let's start with some of the imagery that tells this story, some of the physical life of the story.
  - **Dr. Angel Parham:** The significance of skin color particularly for black writers. It is part of everyday life in the black community that there are so many shades. This opens up the individuality of the people. You don't just get undifferentiated blackness.
  - **Dr. Angel Parham:** Some people will say, "I don't notice color." Baldwin notices color by recognizing the varied beauty of the people in his community.
  - **Danielle Bennette Dukes:** The listening to see theme is throughout the story.
  - **Dr. Angel Parham (13:58):** There is another powerful theme in a desperate and sad way that is a continued analogy to animals.
    - There is a sense that the people in his community have been reduced to an animalistic brutality. There is a desperate struggle to be persons rather than brutalized beings.
- **Danielle Bennette Dukes (19:42):** Why does he have this disdain for Sonny?
  - **Christine Perrin:** The narrator feels in control in a different way, until he can't because his daughter dies.
  - **Danielle Bennette Dukes:** He describes where he is (where he lives) as a parody.
  - **Christine Perrin:** Do you think he is pointing this out as a social ill, but saying that is not what this story is about. This story is about suffering, listening, and seeing. It is also about the things that contribute to that suffering.
- **Dr. Angel Parham (25:22):** There is an intense dwelling on how to deal with suffering. What is it in Sonny that is so sensitive and attuned to beauty?
  - **Dr. Angel Parham:** There is such a sense of desperation, and to be seen.



- **Danielle Bennette Dukes:** This story is about redemption. Sonny finally gets to a point when he can tell his story.
- **Dr. Kathryn Smith:** He wants to be a bird. He wants to sing.
- **Dr. Kathryn Smith:** The music offers this way to search for redemption.
- **Christine Perrin (43:15):** I think we can learn a lot from the resolution.
  - **Christine Perrin:** “He was Sonny’s witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing.”
  - **Danielle Bennette Dukes:** We live in darkness, but there is a light. The band is all the colors. They represent us all.
  - **Christine Perrin:** Isaiah 51:22, it seems Christological as well.
    - The present is always together with the past and the future.
  - **Danielle Bennette Dukes:** He was giving it back, as everything must be given back.
  - **Christine Perrin:** Do you think that Baldwin indicates those tools, or is that something that we learn through our direct contact with the gospel?
- **Christine Perrin (56:45):** What can we learn from the black church in this moment?
  - **Danielle Bennette Dukes:** We can learn to suffer and remain a whole person. How to live in the midst of suffering and have joy. How do you remain a person? How do you persist in dignity?
  - **Dr. Kathryn Smith:** The brother had attempted to survive by erasing his person.
- **Christine Perrin (59:10):** One thing I feel about Baldwin is that he includes me somehow. He acknowledges that I suffer too. He doesn’t forfeit what is his, but he doesn’t exclude other people either.
  - **Danielle Bennette Dukes:** He is bringing forth the human story. We know that all human beings experience and feel despair. There is a prescription for that.
  - **Dr. Kathryn Smith:** Baldwin saw art as a shared human experience in which suffering can be redeemed in the beautiful.
- **Dr. Angel Parham (01:03:21):** He brings up the idea of lament. Once Sonny makes his breakthrough it was no longer a lament.
  - We need each other and we need to recapture this ability to lament.
  - The black church can help all of us with is lament and going back to the biblical tradition of lament.
  - We need to be willing to enter into suffering.