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Reading Assignment INTD100: Coffee and Black Holes
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Notes of a Native son

Part 1.

James Baldwin began his autobiography In 1943 with the death of his father David. David's death takes place only a few hours before his wife gives birth. David's funeral takes place on James's birthday and while you may think it couldn't possibly get worse, it does. During David's funeral a race riot ensues in Harlem. James carefully details his father's life coming north in 1919 as a freed slave before recounting his relationship with a white teacher who took special interest in him. The essay leaves us in New Jersey where James is subject to disgraceful treatment under the jim crow laws.

This essay accounts the author's poverty stricken childhood before diving into racism he experiences in New Jersey as an adult.

Part 2.

While illustrating the drive to the graveyard James begins to vividly describe the details of the abuse he and his siblings suffered at the hand of their father. Some affirmations are

spoken for his father, James describes him as a powerful man possessing a tribal aura with a charming smile but for the most part the reader's is presented with a portrait of an abusive neglectful father. James attributes these abusive tendencies to the abuse David has experienced throughout his life as a black man in America. James does this poetically through comparison of David's deteriorating physical condition to the condition of his mind, despite having isolated himself his entire life David is granted forgiveness from a euglist at his funeral which perplexes James. While I believe there is evidence the cure may be to express one's own experience with the poison in the way James does through writing I find myself wondering whether or not this section of the book is trying to communicate forgiveness may be an alternative cure or at the very least symptom relief. Earlier James tells a story of a strong female character in his childhood demanding a picture of Louis Armstrong be hung in David's living room. This is insulting to David as he forbids Louis Armstrong to be played in his house presumably due to his association with New Orleans. Later in life this woman is ill in need of help and close to death, rather than extend help and forgive her for making him feel discomfort as you might assume a preacher to do, he refuses to assist her in any way and allows her to die. For this James describes him as the

"Most bitter man I ever met"

For his inability to forgive this woman David loses the respect and love his children may have had for him in his life had he not been so consumed by the symptoms of the poison. We see James begin to embody characteristics of his father arguably in a way that is more directly destructive to him than his father's acts of cruelty. His bouts of rage as demonstrated in the assault of a waitress, to the hate towards white people that drive him to rob a store are all extremely dangerous methods of expression for a young black man in the nineteen thirties. It is not until James finds an outlet for his symptoms that he is able to succeed and while it may not

be stated clearly it would be logical to infer James forgives his father on some level as he is able to acknowledge David kept him and his siblings alive. Furthermore James is even able to view his father as a victim. On the surface this may not seem like an extension of gratitude but considering these stories of abuse were regular occurrences for James throughout his childhood one must appreciate the compassion it would take for him to even acknowledge his father. Whatever shade of light he examines his father's character under is irreverent and for possessing the courage to do so James is relieved of his symptoms to a degree.

Part 3.

After his father's funeral James celebrates his birthday downtown, a ritual still religiously practiced by the youth of New York today, meanwhile in the lobby of the Braddock an argument turns violent between a white police officer and a black soldier. The conflict arose when these two men found they held differing opinions in which of them should go home with a young African American woman. This disagreement resulted in the death of the soldier and as happens word began to spread. Information is slowly misconstrued and residents of Harlem are informed the police officer shot the soldier in the back while he attempted to protect the woman. While this was incorrect Harlem either didn't know or wasn't concerned with the details and so a riot commenced. James is opposed to the waste he sees and becomes philosophical as his father always spoke of an apocalypse.

"The first time the word wealth had entered my mind in relation to Harlem was when I saw it scattered in the streets"

While this riot did not result in the end times James stated he was more open minded to the possibility of one after what he witnessed during the riot. While rioting may accomplish little it may have provided an oppressed neighborhood with a fleeting sense of victory.