“No Name in the Street” An Exploration of Power, Privilege, and Difference in the Civil Rights Era

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In his essay, “No Name in the Street,” James Baldwin writes about the Civil Rights era. He uses his life experiences – his travels, friendships, and personal anecdotes – to show the complexity of Black American life. For Baldwin, this complexity is tied to his intersecting identities as a Black gay male intellectual; for example, the way he experiences his race is affected by sexuality, gender, and class. His particular focus is to show how America marginalized him because of his race, making the issue of racism something personal and embodied so that a reader, of any race, could empathize with him. But Baldwin is nuanced in his writing by showing his relative gender and class privilege and how these particular aspects of his identity give him access to traveling, entering certain intellectual spaces, and having his physical needs met. He keeps to the formal definition of essay, meaning to try or attempt, in order to tie together seemingly disparate experiences into a portrayal of what life was like for him and fellow African-Americans in- and outside of the U.S. In this summary, we don’t seek to fill in the narrative gaps, but present his non-linear progression in order to replicate the essay’s reading experience.

In this visual retelling of Baldwin’s essay, we will be using terminology from “The Trouble We’re In: Privilege, Power, and Difference” by Allan G. Johnson in order to point at the complexity Baldwin writes about.