

**THE SON OF A PREACHER MAN: RACE, SEXUALITY AND RELIGION
IN THE WORK OF JAMES BALDWIN**

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ABBREVIATIONS OF BALDWIN TEXTS

"PI"	"The Preservation of Innocence"
<i>GTM</i>	<i>Go Tell it on the Mountain</i>
<i>NNS</i>	<i>Notes of a Native Son</i>
"AN"	"Autobiographical Notes"
"PP"	"Princes and Powers"
<i>GR</i>	<i>Giovanni's Room</i>
"MP"	"The Male Prison"
<i>AC</i>	<i>Another Country</i>
<i>FNT</i>	<i>The Fire Next Time</i>
<i>TMHL</i>	<i>Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone</i>
<i>Rap</i>	<i>A Rap on Race</i>
<i>NNOS</i>	<i>No Name on the Street</i>
<i>IBSCT</i>	<i>If Beale Street Could Talk</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>A Dialogue</i>
<i>JAMH</i>	<i>Just Above My Head</i>
<i>Price</i>	<i>The Price of the Ticket</i>

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the three most persistent and interconnected themes in the work of James Baldwin: race, sexuality, and religion. Central to my thesis is an examination of the ways in which Baldwin's work has troubled readers and critics alike in his refusal both to adhere to a single coherent ideology, and to be labelled or categorised, which I argue has problematised his place in both the American and African-American canons.

This thesis argues for the importance of placing Baldwin in the political and historical climates that his four decades of writing came out of. By examining the ways in which he responded to and wrote from a variegated climate of Protest fiction, Integration and Assimilation, Civil Rights, pre and post-Stonewall, and the emergence of gay studies, this thesis argues that Baldwin presciently foregrounds many of cultural theory's largest debates. Baldwin's work repeatedly questions not only the boundaries of black literature, but how blackness itself might be constituted. How is the canon formed? What, Baldwin's work demands, is whiteness? What is homosexuality and homosexual literature?

Introduction

Some people considered me a faggot, for some I was a hero, for some I was a whore, for some I was a devious cocksman, for some I was an Uncle Tom.

James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*

One of the reasons I came flying over here [Paris] was that at home I'd worked myself into such a state that I didn't know where I was or where I was going or what I wanted. . . . The best I can say is that what with race, sex, calvinism, housing, the kind of violent, anarchic, hostility--breeding pattern of all my life--a pattern which, immediately one discovers that it has turned inward and become uncontrollable, then seems invested with the powers to kill--I did not know who I was and could not even be resigned because I had nothing to be resigned to.

James Baldwin, Letter to Bill Phillips
(April 1949)

In a perceptive article chronicling the tribute to James Baldwin at the Lincoln Center, New York, in February 2001, the Irish novelist Colm Tóibín pondered over the contradictory portraits of the honoured artist:

It is hard to decide what part of him came first. Was the colour of his skin more important than his sexuality? Was his religious upbringing more important than his reading of the American masters? Were his sadness and anger more important than his love of laughter, his delight in the world? Did his prose style, as the novelist Russell Banks claimed that evening, take its bearing from Emerson, or was it, as the writer Hilton Als put it, "a high-faggot style," or did it originate, as John Edgar Wideman claimed, from a mixture of the King James Bible and African American speech?¹

Tóibín's article neatly highlights the difficulties of defining a prodigious writer whose work spanned four decades, culminating in one hundred and twenty four book reviews, six novels, seven works of non-fiction, two plays, a children's book, a scenario, a collection of short stories and two books of poetry.

Despite Tóibín's conclusion that the tributes at the Lincoln Center pointed towards a legacy that "is both powerful and fluid," and that his work "fit[s] whatever category each reader requires," Baldwin's reputation, as I examine in this thesis, has suffered from his refusal to adhere to a single coherent ideology and his reluctance and resistance towards labelling and categorisation.² Whilst Baldwin is often included as part of the canonical male African-American triumvirate (along with Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright), much of his work remains neglected.³ Although his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953) is often required reading on many university courses, and although his short story "Sonny's Blues" is frequently anthologised, Baldwin's work is noticeably absent from many recent critical works on black literature and culture. As Craig Werner has pointed out, Baldwin is "conspicuous by his absence" from such important critical works as Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Robert Stepto's

¹ Colm Tóibín, "The Last Witness," *London Review of Books* 23, no. 18 (20 September 2001): 15.

² Tóibín: 15.

³ On a more general level, the popularity of Baldwin, Wright and Ellison has been eclipsed since the early 1970s by the success of female African-American authors, such as Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks and Alice Walker. Whilst it could be argued that Baldwin's uncertain status is symptomatic of a more general decline in the interest in black American male writing, I want to stress that it is not the only or main reason. See Cora Kaplan, "Keeping the

Behind the Veil (1979), Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: a Vernacular Theory* (1984) to name but a few.⁴ For the reader and critic Baldwin's work remains puzzling, enigmatic and inconsistent as a brief overview of his work illustrates.

Whilst Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* was hailed as a "passionate identification" with black culture, his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956), portrays a homosexual relationship in Paris with no African-American characters. Hailed as a seminal work of homosexual literature, Baldwin, however, repeatedly steered readers away from reading *Giovanni's Room* as a work of gay fiction. In his first book of essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Baldwin forcefully distanced himself from the genre of protest fiction, insisting that he was an American, not an African-American writer. Whilst Baldwin's message of love in the face of racial intolerance frustrated and bemused black radical writers of the 1960s, by 1972 Baldwin argued that it may be necessary to kill white people in order to put an end to racial injustice. Sidelined by Civil rights activism on account of his

Color in *The Color Purple*," *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), 177-187.

sexuality, Baldwin later became heavily involved with the Black Panthers.

Baldwin's literary twists and turns have not only puzzled but frustrated literary critics who have sought to place him in one or either category. In particular, as a gay and African-American author, Baldwin's work has suffered from critics who have attempted to privilege his ethnicity or his sexuality. Emmanuel Nelson's pioneering work (notably two articles in 1983 and 1991) in turn acknowledges his debt to the work of Andrea Lowenstein, whose article, published in *Gay Community News* (1980), titled "James Baldwin and His Critics" is the first piece of scholarship to fully explore the implications of Baldwin's racial and sexual identities.⁵ "One wonders," Lowenstein writes "whether, if Baldwin were either black or gay, more reviewers might be able to actually address his work itself." Instead, Lowenstein argues, Baldwin's "double minority status" is so

⁴ See Craig Werner, "James Baldwin: Politics and the Gospel Impulse," *New Politics* 2, no. 2 (1989): 107.

⁵ See Andrea Lowenstein, "James Baldwin and His Critics," *Gay Community News* (9 February 1980): 11; Emmanuel Nelson, "John Rechy, James Baldwin and the American Double Minority Literature," *Journal of American Culture* 6, no. 2 (1983): 70-4; Nelson, "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction," *Journal of American Culture* 14, no. 3 (1991): 91-6.

"threatening" that "what is finally reviewed in the end is the critics' own fears and projections."⁶

Although there are still some remarkable silences on Baldwin's sexuality, there has been a steady trickle of articles since the early 1980s examining the implications of Baldwin as both a gay and a black writer. Amongst a handful of significant articles, Lorelei Cederstrom's article, "Love, Race and Sex in the Novels of James Baldwin," (1984) forcefully argues that "it is in the areas of love and sex that [Baldwin's] ideas are the most revolutionary."⁷ David Bergman's excellent chapter "The Agony of Gay Black Literature" is a sophisticated reading not only of Baldwin's double minority status, but also of the latter's ambivalence towards homosexual liberation.⁸

More recently still, the two latest collections of essays have focussed on Baldwin's race and sexuality as even a cursory glance at *James Baldwin Now* (1999) reveals: Marlon Ross's "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality;" William J. Spurlin's "Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity: James Baldwin and the Identity

⁶ Lowenstein: 11.

⁷ Lorelei Cederstrom, "Love, Race and Sex in the Novels of James Baldwin," *Mosaic* 17, no. 2 (1984): 176.

⁸ David Bergman, "The Agony of Black Literature," *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 163-187.

Politics of Race and Sexuality;" Nicholas Boggs's "Of Mimicry and (*Little Man Little*) Man: Toward a Queersighted Theory of Black Childhood;" James Darsey's "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and Another Country," and Josh Kun's "Life According to the Beat: James Baldwin, Bessie Smith and the Perilous Sounds of Love." In the most recent collection of essays, *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen* (2000), there are comparable themes: Susan Feldman's "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics;" Charles P. Toombs's "Black-Gay-Man Chaos in Another Country;" Yasmin DeGout's "'Masculinity' and (Im)maturity: 'The Man Child' and Other Stories in Baldwin's Gender Studies Enterprise," and Warren J. Carson's "Manhood, Masculinity, and Male Bonding in *Just Above My Head*."

A further critical division in his work is highlighted by the conflicting views on whether Baldwin is primarily an essayist or novelist. Despite Baldwin's claim that he never perceived himself as an essayist, a number of critics have contrasted the secure legacy of his non-fiction with his dubious reputation as a novelist.⁹ "James Baldwin was

⁹ James Baldwin, "Introduction to *Notes of a Native Son*," (1984) *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, selected by Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 809.

literature for me," enthused Henry Louis Gates, Jr., adding, "especially the essay."¹⁰ For many critics, such as Harold Bloom, "[w]hatever the ultimate canonical judgement upon James Baldwin's fiction may prove to be, his nonfictional work clearly has permanent status in American literature."¹¹ Similarly, by 1963, Irving Howe concluded that "[w]hatever his ultimate success or failure as a novelist, Baldwin had already secured his place as one of the two or three greatest essayists this country has ever produced."¹²

Baldwin's uncertain reputation as a novelist was ironically generated by the success of his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, illustrated by Stanley Crouch's conclusion that the "talent for writing fiction that Baldwin showed in his first novel . . . never achieved maturity."¹³ Critics who were puzzled by his departure from black culture with *Giovanni's Room*, largely pilloried *Another Country* (1962), which, for many critics, signalled his demise as a novelist. As Calvin C. Hernton noted, by 1964,

¹⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "An Interview with Josephine Baker and James Baldwin," *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, ed. Quincy Troupe (New York and London, etc.: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 163.

¹¹ Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *James Baldwin: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 1.

¹² Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Selected Writings, 1950-1990* (San Diego & New York, etc.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 135.

Baldwin was "at the zenith (and decline) of his fame in America," with a number of African-Americans already expressing "ambivalence" over his work.¹⁴ Morris Dickstein, for example, noted that, whilst *Another Country* was "shapeless," the "feelings were still vigorous and sharp," in contrast to his fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), which Dickstein concluded was "a long, dismal failure."¹⁵ For Dickstein, Baldwin the novelist "seemed to have lost all ability to command belief," a point echoed by Jean-François Gounard, who concluded that, although Baldwin was "an excellent essayist and a very good polemicist, by the late seventies Baldwin no longer seemed to know how to define a novel."¹⁶

The consensus that Baldwin had lost his footing by the mid-1960s is illustrated by criticism that points to an increasing lack of clarity and cohesion in his writing, particularly in his refusal to adopt a single line. As William Wasserstrom concluded in 1980, "not once during a career now ending its third decade,

¹³ Stanley Crouch, "The Rage of Race," *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979-1989* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 235.

¹⁴ Calvin C. Hernton, *White Papers For White Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 105.

¹⁵ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 166.

¹⁶ Jean-François Gounard, *The Racial Problem in the Works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin*, trans. Joseph J. Rodgers, Jr., foreword by Jean F. Béranger (London & Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 254.

had James Baldwin lapsed in public fealty to a single idea," a point that the African-American author made himself in his introduction to *The Price of the Ticket*.¹⁷ Reflecting on his early years as a Trotskyite, Baldwin concluded that it "was useful as I learned that it may be impossible to indoctrinate me."¹⁸

And yet, despite Wasserstrom's positive reading of Baldwin's refusal to adhere to a single ideology, many critics have seen his work as too far-reaching, not specific enough, chaotic, as François Burgess concluded in 1972: "Alone among the Black contemporary writers, Baldwin could not or did not know how to find a central ideology that would give to his work coherence and unity."¹⁹ For other critics, Baldwin's work was weakened because he "does not know what he stands for, sociologically."²⁰ Perhaps most damning of all, some critics, such as Addison Gayle, criticised his writing for not showing "knowledge of the history

¹⁷ William Wasserstrom, "James Baldwin: Stepping Out of the Promise," *Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945*, ed. A. Robert Lee (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980), 74.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, "Introduction," *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's/ Marek, 1985), xiii; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Price*.

¹⁹ Cited by Rosa Bobia, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin in France* (New York & Washington, etc.: Peter Lang, 1997), 54.

²⁰ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (1967; reprint with a foreword by Bazel E. Ellen and Ernest J. Wilson III (New York: Quill, 1984), 482.

and culture of black people," concluding that "[o]f black history, he is totally ignorant, and of black writers before Richard Wright, oblivious."²¹

Characterised by inconsistencies and what Howe called his "rifts in logic," a number of critics bemoaned, as Harold Cruse posited, the "tormented inconsistency that runs through Mr. Baldwin's work," or what Albert Murray referred to as the "exasperating confusion" in his writing.²²

Whilst scholarship on Baldwin has criticised his writing for being too disparate, too disordered, this seeming lack of cohesion was central and internal to his writing. Acknowledging that his work left him open to "a vast amount of misunderstanding," and calling himself "the perfectly impossible man," Baldwin's work relentlessly called for an interrogation and examination of complexity.²³ "All theories are suspect," Baldwin wrote in his first collection of essays, adding that "one must find, therefore, one's

²¹ Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1975), 219; see also Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), who accuses Baldwin of failing to write out of the African-American traditions that he criticised Richard Wright for (147-8).

²² Howe, 121; Cruse, 200; Murray, 148.

²³ Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race* (New York: Dell, 1971), 136; David Leeming, "The White Problem," "Home and Away: Twentieth Century Masters Tribute to James Baldwin," *Pen America: A Journal For Writers and Readers*, ed. M. Mark, 1, no. 2 (fall 2001): 20.

own moral centre and move through the world hoping that this centre will guide one aright."²⁴ As if prophetically anticipating Tóibín's difficulties in locating him, Baldwin insisted that it is:

Our passion for categorisation, life neatly fitted into pegs, [which] has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown in meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of definitions.²⁵

Time and time again Baldwin calls for the reader to look beyond categories, to search out and savour the complexity within. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," the essay that marked his entrance into the literary world, Baldwin warned that by "overlooking, denying, evading . . . complexity," life itself was rejected.²⁶ Baldwin famously criticised the protest novel on the grounds of its "insistence that it is his categorisation alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."²⁷

²⁴ James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes of a Native Son* [1955] (London: Penguin, 1991), 16; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Notes*.

²⁵ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes*, 24.

²⁶ Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes*, 21.

²⁷ Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes*, 28.

In Baldwin's repudiation of labels and categorisation, two important themes emerge. First, Baldwin's refusal to be labelled by others, his insistence on the right to use language to define--and not be defined. As Baldwin remarked in regards to his struggle as a writer: "I was at war with, was completely unable to accept the assumptions of, the official vocabulary into which I had been born."²⁸ In order to facilitate change, Baldwin declared to the poet Nikki Giovanni, "[w]e have to make our own definitions and begin to rule the world that way."²⁹ Asked in 1979 what he hoped to achieve, Baldwin replied that he wished "to destroy that frame of reference for myself and for those coming after me."³⁰

Baldwin's emphasis on the need to take control of language explicitly refers to his attempts to escape the prison of racial epithets. Referring to terms such as "Uncle Tom" and "Aunt Jemima," Baldwin repeatedly stated that such descriptions "are labeled legends, [which] do not describe Black people at all."³¹ Or, as Baldwin wrote elsewhere "you have not described me

²⁸ Cited by Leeming: 36.

²⁹ James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, foreword by Ida Lewis, afterword by Orde Coombs (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), 34.

³⁰ Kalamu ya Salaam, "James Baldwin: Looking Towards the Eighties," *Black Collegian* 10, no. 2 (October-November 1979): 108.

³¹ Salaam: 107.

when you call me a nigger or when you call me a Negro leader. You have only described yourself."³² In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin counsels his nephew, warning him that white people expect him to fail, to "perish by never being allowed to go behind the white man's definitions."³³ Contesting the common-held view that the African-American knows his/ her place, that he/ she is "a fixed star," or "an immovable pillar," Baldwin insists on the fluidity and flux of social and racial identities.³⁴ "American writers," Baldwin stated in *Nobody Knows My Name*, "do not have a fixed society to describe. The only society they know is one in which nothing is fixed and which the individual must fight for his identity."³⁵

Baldwin's emphasis on the individual's struggle for identity is the second theme that courses through his repeated emphasis on self-definition. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin explicitly tells his nephew that he must find his own way through the labyrinth of racialised America: "Take no one's word for anything,

³² James Baldwin, "The Use of the Blues," *Playboy* (January 1964): 132.

³³ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* [1963] (London: Penguin, 1964), 17; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Fire*.

³⁴ Baldwin, *Fire*, 17.

³⁵ James Baldwin, "Introduction," *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* [1961] (London: Penguin, 1961), 12; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Nobody Knows*.

including mine--but trust your experience."³⁶ Instead, echoing his hope to find his own moral centre, Baldwin insists that "[e]verybody's journey is individual."³⁷ "I was not born to be what someone said I was. I was not born to be defined by someone else," Baldwin declared in his last interview, "but by myself and myself only."³⁸

Baldwin's emphasis on individuation evinces a deeply-rooted Puritanism, which, as Sacvan Bercovitch has eloquently documented, "shift[ed] the grounds of private identity from the institution to the individual."³⁹ Time and time again in his essays the reader is confronted with the call for self-examination. In the introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin firmly stated that "I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living," a theme he continued to insist upon.⁴⁰ In the introduction to the *Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin again insisted on the need for self-scrutiny:

To do your first works over means to reexamine everything. Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can,

³⁶ Baldwin, *Fire*, 16.

³⁷ *Salaam*: 110.

³⁸ Quincy Troupe, "The Last Interview," *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, 193.

³⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1975), 11.

⁴⁰ Baldwin, "Introduction," *Nobody Knows*, 12.

examine all of it, travel your road
again and tell the truth about it. Sing
or shout or testify or keep it to
yourself: but *know whence you came.*⁴¹

Whilst Baldwin's insistence on self-examination and individuation is evocative, as Nathan Scott has noted, of Emerson's "simple genuine self against the whole world," his insistence on "myself and myself only," suggests a unified self that his work elsewhere contests.⁴² At times Baldwin acknowledged that there was a "self" that could be "deciphered:" "there was . . . a rock between that self and me, the accumulate rock of ages. . . . Yet, there was a me."⁴³ And yet at other times Baldwin insisted on the difficulties of locating selfhood: "between the self as it is and the self as one sees it, there is also a distance, even harder to gauge."⁴⁴ As a black, gay expatriate writer, Baldwin's work is a constant battle for selfhood, for identity, as the titles of his works suggests: *Nobody Knows My Name; No Name on the Street*, and "Stranger in the Village." In contrast to Darryl Pinckney's conclusion that Baldwin developed "a permanence of

⁴¹ Baldwin, "Introduction," *Price*, xix.

⁴² Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Judgement Marked By A Cellar: The American Negro Writer and The Dialectic of Despair," *Denver Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1967): 31.

⁴³ Baldwin, "Introduction to *Notes of a Native Son*," (1984) *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, 809.

self that the insecurity of his social condition could not threaten," this "permanence of self," is always precarious, unstable.⁴⁵ Throughout his work, as my thesis argues, Baldwin's use of personal pronouns is a battlefield, where the "I" is at times personal, even confessional, collective, transhistorical or indeed ambiguous. Or, as Baldwin eloquently referred to himself, it refers to "all those strangers called Jimmy Baldwin."⁴⁶

Recent criticism, and in particular Dwight McBride's introduction to *James Baldwin Now*, has attempted to capture and locate Baldwin's multifarious roles. Surveying the ways in which Baldwin's work has been categorised, McBride argues that, with cultural studies, it is now finally possible to recognise Baldwin as "an intricately negotiated amalgam of all those things" (gay, black, expatriate, etc.).⁴⁷ Whilst many of the essays are insightful and mindful of his divisive critical history, at times, as I show, by claiming that his work should not be privileged in one

⁴⁴ James Baldwin, "God's Country," *New York Review of Books* 8 (23 March 1967): 20.

⁴⁵ Darryl Pinckney, "The Magic of James Baldwin," *New York Review of Books* (19 November 1998): 64.

⁴⁶ Eve Auchinloss and Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin--an Interview," *Conversations with Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 79.

⁴⁷ Dwight A. McBride, "Introduction: New Approaches to Baldwin," *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York & London: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

camp or other, they veer towards a dissipated picture of Baldwin who is "post-categorical" and without any cohesion, a fact the author was only too aware of: "It is a curious way to find your identity," Baldwin told Margaret Mead, "labeling yourself by labeling all the things that you're not."⁴⁸

This thesis explores the themes of race, sexuality and religion in Baldwin's work, and examines the ways in which his refusal to adhere to a single ideology has troubled readers and critics alike. Baldwin's mercurial views on race, sex and religion and his refutation of labels and categories owe much, I argue, to the variegated historical and political climate in which he wrote. This thesis is attentive to Baldwin's critique of America as "a country devoted to the death of the paradox," and yet it also seeks to find coherence in his writing.⁴⁹ By examining the ways in which Baldwin responded to and wrote from a climate of Protest fiction, Integration and Assimilation, Civil Rights, pre and post-Stonewall, and the emergence of gay studies, this thesis argues that Baldwin's work presciently foregrounds some of cultural theory's largest debates: by repeatedly

⁴⁸ James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race*, 105.

⁴⁹ Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes*, 26.

questioning the boundaries of black literature, of blackness itself, of whiteness and of homosexuality.

Chapter One begins by examining the ways in which criticism since the late 1980s has sought to rescue Baldwin as a black and gay writer, without privileging his ethnicity or his sexuality. Surveying this important work, this chapter turns back to Baldwin's writing to examine his complicated views on sexuality. Why did Baldwin refuse to label *Giovanni's Room* a homosexual novel? Why did he resist the terms "gay," "homosexual," and "bisexual?" Why did he only write three essays on the subject of homosexuality? Whilst recent work has rightly pointed to the ways in which criticism has tended to privilege Baldwin's race over his sexuality, how do we read the author's repeated insistence that "the sexual question comes after the question of colour?"

Chapter two looks at the ways in which *Giovanni's Room* has emerged as a central text in homosexual literature and yet has remained on the margins of the African-American canon. This chapter argues that *Giovanni's Room* explores the very issues of authenticity that have hounded the novel from its inception; it does so by locating Baldwin's second novel in the cultural and

political climate of the 1950s--a period that saw an increasing anxiety over the policing of racial, and of sexual boundaries. Both by its absence of African-American characters and its critical neglect, *Giovanni's Room*, I argue, forcefully asks how African-American literature might be defined.

Chapter three begins by examining Baldwin's complicated and often contradictory views on race. Whilst recent criticism has insisted that Baldwin veers away from essentialist readings of race, I argue that his work is more complex, reflecting the shifting climate of Civil rights, Négritude and the Black Aesthetic. I show how Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, reflects and foregrounds more recent theoretical debates on blackness. In contrast to recent criticism that has championed his writing for transcending identity categories, this chapter argues that Baldwin, far from advocating the destruction of all categories and barriers, explores the terrors and difficulties of a society without labels such as black and white, gay and straight.

Chapter four begins by looking at the ways in which Baldwin has been acclaimed as a voice of black protest, as a Civil rights activist, and, more

recently, as a prescient interrogator of theories of race, sex and masculinity. Yet despite contemporary theory's claim to have rescued the complexity of Baldwin, there is glaring absence of criticism that focuses on the relationship between race, sexuality and religion in his work. This chapter explores the reasons for this neglect and urges the importance of reading Baldwin's work within the specificity of his Pentecostal background. Might it be that cultural theory is ill-equipped--or simply unable--to engage with religion? Could it be that religion is the most important aspect of Baldwin's work? Does religion offer a cohesive unity to his often-inconsistent views?

CHAPTER ONE

**"Looking For Jimmy:" Sex, Privacy and Black
Nationalist Fervour**

In an interview conducted shortly after the release of his film, *Looking For Langston* (1989), Isaac Julien remarked that his project could easily have been titled "Looking For Jimmy."¹ Instead, Julien's film, which explores the relationship between the black gay artist and the community, is dedicated to Baldwin, whose photograph weaves in and out of Julien's meditation on Langston Hughes. Julien's use of Baldwin's image renders visible a gay black artistic lineage that has historically been obscured.² By juxtaposing the Harlem-born Baldwin with his literary forefathers of the Renaissance, Julien suggests the ways in which Baldwin--as gay black artist--is a direct descendant of homosexual and

¹ Essex Hemphill, "Looking For Langston: An Interview with Isaac Julien," *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1991), 175.

² For work on the Harlem Renaissance and sexuality, see Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (London: Penguin, 1991), 318-32; Gregory Woods, "Gay Readings of the Harlem Renaissance Poets," *Gay and Lesbian Writers of Color*, ed. Emmanuel Nelson (New York & London: Harrington Park Press, 1993), 318-332. For a cultural historical account, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the*

bisexual writers such as Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman and Claude McKay.³

Unlike Hughes's sexuality, which Julien acknowledges has always been clouded in uncertainty, Baldwin has arguably been the most visible gay African-American writer since the Harlem Renaissance. Implicit in Julien's iconographic invocation of Baldwin is that we do not need to look for Jimmy, since his sexuality--in contrast to that of Hughes--has never been in question.⁴ Often cited as an inspiration to many black gay writers, Baldwin's work, according to Joseph Beam, helped rip the hinges off the closet.⁵ Until the publication of *Just Above My Head* (1979), Baldwin's last novel, Beam claims that

Gale Male Underworld, 1890-1940 (London: Flamingo, 1995), 227-310.

³ Apart from Baldwin's image, Julien uses a photograph of Countee Cullen who was Baldwin's French teacher and literary advisor to the English dept. at Frederick Douglass Junior High, which further forges Julien's connection between Baldwin and the Harlem Renaissance; see James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991), 13.

⁴ See Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), where he notes that "Hughes made almost a fetish of the secrecy about his sexual interests," adding that "the truth about his sexuality will probably never be discovered" (336).

⁵ Amongst numerous references to Baldwin as an inspiration to gay writers (both black and white), see Joseph Beam, ed., *In the Life: A Gay Black Anthology* (Boston: Alyson Publications, inc., 1986), 90, 95, 231; Barbara Smith, "We Must Always Bury Our Dead Twice: A Tribute to James Baldwin," *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick, N.J. & London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 75-80.

African-American writers had been suffering "a kind of 'nationalistic heterosexism.'"⁶

Whilst his writing offered solace and recognition for many of his contemporary readers, it was not until the 1980s that criticism (notably the work of Andrea Lowenstein and Emmanuel Nelson) began to argue for Baldwin's central place, not only as an important African-American writer, but as a black and gay artist. Even a cursory glance at recent scholarship on Baldwin indicates the ways in which the field is dominated by articles on Baldwin's explorations into and depictions of black masculinity and sexuality. To cite one of many recent examples, Yasmin DeGout, in a recent collection of Baldwin essays, makes the point that "any reading of Baldwin's fiction reveals him to be progenitor of many of the theoretical formulations currently associated with feminist, gay, and gender studies."⁷

But even as Baldwin's reputation as an important--perhaps the most important--gay black American writer of the twentieth century becomes increasingly secure, a closer examination of his work reveals a myriad of

⁶ Joseph Beam, "Not A Bad Legacy Brother," *Brother To Brother*, 185.

⁷ Yasmin DeGout, "'Masculinity' and (Im)maturity: 'The Man Child' and Other Stories in Baldwin's Gender Studies Enterprise," *Re-viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, ed. D. Quentin Miller,

ambiguities, contradictions and uncertainties that sit uneasily with his increasingly iconic status.⁸ One notable example that I examine in the following chapter is Baldwin's repeated efforts to steer readers away from the importance of homosexuality in his second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Whilst *Giovanni's Room* is generally acknowledged as a gay classic, Baldwin repeatedly played down the theme of same-sex desire: "*Giovanni's Room*," Baldwin stated curiously in 1985, "is not about homosexuality."⁹ What happens, this chapter asks, when we go looking for Jimmy?

For a writer who so fearlessly and tirelessly addressed issues of homosexuality and bisexuality in his fiction, Baldwin's relative silence about homosexuality in his essays seems surprising. As an essayist, Baldwin's output was prodigious, and although he never wrote an autobiography, his essays are notable for their personal revelations and wealth

foreword by David Leeming (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 134.

⁸ A number of critical works have focused on *GR* as an important gay text: Claude J. Summers, "'Looking at the Naked Sun': James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*," *Gay Fictions: Wilde To Stonewall* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 172-194; Marlon B. Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality," *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight McBride (New York & London: New York University Press, 1999), 13-55; Kemp Williams, "The Metaphorical Construction of Sexuality in *Giovanni's Room*," *Literature and Homosexuality*, ed. Michael Meyer (Amsterdam: Rodoi, 2000), 23-33.

⁹ Richard Goldstein, "Go The Way Your Blood Beats: An Interview with James Baldwin," *Village Voice* 26 (June 1984): 13.

of biographical material. Yet it was as late as 1985 in an essay titled "Here Be Dragons," the closing piece in his collected non-fiction, *The Price of the Ticket* that Baldwin wrote about his sexuality openly. Homosexuality--although not explicitly Baldwin's--was discussed in two earlier essays, "The Preservation of Innocence," (1949) and "The Male Prison," (1954) originally published in the *New Leader* as "Gide as Husband and Homosexual," later collected in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961).

Although Baldwin wrote little about homosexuality in his essays, he was more forthcoming in conversation. In an interview with Richard Goldstein in 1985 (published as "Go the Way Your Blood Beats"), Baldwin delivered his most candid discussion of homosexuality. Whilst I will be focussing in some detail on Baldwin's essays on homosexuality below, the Goldstein interview offers a useful springboard for considering Baldwin's often surprising views on homosexuality. In particular, I want to consider three main points. First, Baldwin's repeated rejection of the terms "homosexual," "gay" and "bisexual;" second, his insistence that sexuality is a private matter; and finally his insistence that race is a more important question than issues of sexuality. Whilst this chapter seeks to locate Baldwin's views in the shifting

cultural and political arenas of the four decades that he wrote, I argue that the mid to late 1960s impacted most significantly on Baldwin's development as a writer. This chapter then turns to examine Baldwin's three essays on homosexuality, arguing that they help elucidate some of Baldwin's more puzzling pronouncements.

Despite his central status as an important figure of twentieth century gay literature, Baldwin consistently renounced the adjectives "homosexual," "gay," and "bisexual." "The word gay," Baldwin told Richard Goldstein, "has always rubbed me the wrong way. I never understood exactly what is meant by it," a view that he also forcefully echoed in an interview with James Mossman:¹⁰

Those terms, homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, are 20th century terms which, for me, have very little meaning. I've never, myself, in watching myself and other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were.¹¹

¹⁰ Goldstein: 13.

¹¹ James Mossman, "Race, Hate, Sex, and Colour: A Conversation with James Baldwin," *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson & London: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 54.

Asked by Goldstein whether he considered himself gay, Baldwin replied that he did not: "I didn't have a word for it. The only one I had was homosexual and that didn't quite cover whatever it was I was beginning to feel."¹²

Baldwin's dislike of the terms "gay" and "homosexual" can in part be explained by the fact that he grew up as part of a pre-Stonewall generation.¹³ Samuel R. Delany recalls that Bruce Nugent, like Baldwin, stated on numerous occasions during the 1960s that, "I just don't see why everyone has to be labeled. I just don't think words like homosexual--or gay--do anything for anybody."¹⁴ According to Delany, Nugent felt left behind by the gay activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a point implicitly made by Baldwin. The gay world, Baldwin states, is "a world that has very little to do with me, with where I did my growing up," adding that gay life was "a phenomenon that came along much after I was formed."¹⁵

¹² Goldstein: 13.

¹³ See David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), who notes that Baldwin was self-conscious of his scoliosis, which he believed made him walk in an effeminate manner; Leeming also notes that--until the 1980s--Baldwin avoided silks and waistcoats, believing "it was important not to 'signify' a particular stereotype" (45, 377).

¹⁴ Samuel R. Delany and Joseph Beam, "Samuel R. Delany: The Possibility of Possibilities," *In the Life*, 204; Essex Hemphill, "Introduction," *Brother to Brother*, xvi.

¹⁵ Goldstein: 13.

Baldwin and Nugent's dislike of identity categories was shared, as I shortly illustrate, by two notable white homosexual writers. However, in "Go the Way Your Blood Beats," Baldwin deliberately steers Goldstein away from comparing black and white experiences of discrimination on account of homosexuality. Rejecting Goldstein's claim that white and black homosexuals may feel the same sense of alienation, Baldwin stated that "the gay world as such is no more prepared to accept black people than anywhere else in society. It's a very hermetically sealed world with very unattractive features, including racism."¹⁶ Baldwin's comment may in part explain his reluctance to associate with the gay movement. On the one hand, the gay movement borrowed heavily from the political tactics and experiences of the civil rights movement. Not only that, but, as Denis Altman has noted, "the very furtiveness and outlaw status of the gayworld has led to its greater integration across colour lines." But, on the other hand, as Altman points out, white homosexuals are not necessarily less racist than their white heterosexual counterparts.¹⁷ Still more important, perhaps, is the

¹⁶ Goldstein: 14.

¹⁷ Cited by Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: From Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 333.

perception of many homosexual African-Americans that the gay movement was a predominantly white organisation. A. Billy Jones, for example, recalls that, for many blacks, "the gay movement looked like a white trip with a few misguided Blacks tagging along for the ride," a point echoed by Essex Hemphill, who noted that he did not recognise his experience in homosexual literature, concluding that "I could have ignorantly concluded that homosexuality was peculiar to white people."¹⁸

Although, as I have noted, there are dangers in conflating white and black experiences of homosexuality, Baldwin's views are also mirrored--at least in part--by arguably the two most influential writers of homosexual fiction this century, Gore Vidal and Jean Genet. As I discuss in my next chapter, despite the fact that Baldwin was dismissive of *The City and the Pillar* (1948), both writers shared a resistance to the mainstream rhetoric and ideology of the post-war gay movement. Although Baldwin criticised Vidal's novel, claiming that it is "not concerned with homosexuality but the ever-present danger of sexual activity between men," there are clear parallels

¹⁸ A. Billy Jones, "A Father's Need: A Parent's Desire," *In the Life*, 143; Essex Hemphill, "Introduction," *Brother to Brother*, xvi.

between the two authors.¹⁹ Baldwin's insistence that the word "homosexual" is a verb, not a noun, echoes Vidal's more lucid view that "despite its current usage, the word [homosexual] is an adjective describing a sexual action, not a noun describing a recognizable type."²⁰ As Robert Corber has eloquently argued, Vidal's refusal to locate homosexuality along the axes of catalogued experiences aligns him more with gay liberationists than with the more prevalent gay rights activists. In contrast to gay liberationists who questioned the validity of sexual categorisation, gay rights activists sought to align homosexuality with issues of social subordination, such as the plight of ethnic minorities. In attempting to show parallels between ethnicity and homosexuality, gay rights activists needed to demonstrate the common characteristics shared by homosexual men and women.²¹

Baldwin's dislike of sexual classification also has parallels with the views of Jean Genet. According to Edmund White in his magisterial biography of Genet, "the social world evoked by the phrase 'homosexual

¹⁹ James Baldwin, "The Preservation of Innocence," *Zero 1* (spring 1949): 21; hereafter abbreviated as "PI."

²⁰ Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), 139; Goldstein: 16.

²¹ Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 139-40; Corber notes that Donald Webster Corey's study of homosexuality, *The*

culture' would have struck Genet as absurd, since he considered his own homosexuality to be something that alienated him from everyone, even other homosexuals."²² Although Genet, like Baldwin, rarely lent his name to the causes of gay rights, Baldwin was considerably more vociferous in his condemnation of public displays of solidarity.²³ Although he spoke in New York on "Race, Racism and the Gay Community" in 1982, Baldwin harshly condemned public exhibitions.²⁴ "These people are not involved in anything resembling love-making," Baldwin stated, "they're involved in some kind of exhibition of their disaster."²⁵ The very negative language here suggests more than a suspicion of labels; whilst I resist the adjective "homophobic," it

Homosexual in America (1951) drew on Gunnar Myrdal's influential study of race relations, *An American Dilemma* (1944), 91.

²² Edmund White, *Genet: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 317; see also White's discussion of Genet's "Fragments," a work, according to White, in which Genet "had never regarded homosexuality with such bitterness" (389).

²³ See White, who notes that Genet used his name for an early gay liberation publication, but that he insisted "that he had never written fiction to promote gay rights or any other political causes" (530).

²⁴ Leeming, 359.

²⁵ Cited by Eve Auchinloss and Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin," *Conversations with Baldwin*, 80. Baldwin's negative statements are even more surprising given the prevalence of AIDS in the black community; see Phillip Brian Harper, "Eloquence and Epitaph: Black Nationalism and the Homophobic Impulse in Responses to the Death of Max Robinson," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), where he notes that, although they account for less than 6 per cent of the U.S. population, 23 per cent of reported cases of AIDS were African-American (159).

illustrates the complexity of Baldwin's views, which I will return to.²⁶

Given that Baldwin used the very public forum of the novel to explore homosexuality and bisexuality, Baldwin's insistence that "one's sexual preference is a private matter," sits at odds with his reputation as a key figure in gay literary history. And yet Baldwin's insistence on privacy punctuates his commentaries on sexuality. In his essay on Gide, for example (which I return to), Baldwin reprimanded the French author, insisting that he ought to have kept his sexuality hidden. Baldwin's sexuality, as he recounted to Goldstein, was "very personal, absolutely personal. It was really a matter between me and God."²⁷

Leaving aside his intriguing invocation of Christianity for the moment, I want to consider other possible factors for Baldwin's desire for privacy. Jerome de Manet reaches the reasonable conclusion that Baldwin "reserved the more public voice of spokesman

²⁶ It should be noted that Baldwin was also against all forms of exhibition; see Fern Marja Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1966), where Baldwin states, "I loathe parades. . . . The whole parade idea--there's something in me that profoundly disapproves of it" (215). For a further example, see James Mossman, "Race, Hate, Sex, and Colour: A Conversation with James Baldwin and Colin MacInnes," *Conversations with Baldwin*, where JB describes the public intimacy of interracial couples as "a kind of desperate advertising" (49).

²⁷ In an interesting comparison to Baldwin's comment, see James S. Tinney, "Why A Black Gay Church?," *In the Life*, who asks, "Is not

(of the black community as a whole, of writers and artists) for his essays and formal addresses, while he often let his fictional characters discuss the more private issues of sexual politics and preference."²⁸

The division that I addressed earlier in Baldwin's work supports de Manet's argument: in contrast to the paucity of essays dealing with sexuality, Baldwin's fiction is replete with depictions of same-sex desire. Why Baldwin chose to circumscribe homosexuality in his essays is a different question. One answer may lie in Baldwin's awareness that readers and critics who were uncomfortable with his fictional depictions of homosexuality and bisexuality were less troubled by the emphasis on race in his essays. Whilst critics are divided in their appraisal of Baldwin's strength as foremost an essayist or novelist, Emmanuel Nelson is surely right to suggest that many heterosexist critics felt more comfortable with Baldwin's relative silence on sexuality in his essays.²⁹

The glaring disparity between discussions of sexuality in his essays and fiction also highlights

religion, like sexuality, a personal thing between individuals and God?" (70).

²⁸ Jerome de Manet, "Revisiting Madeleine and 'The Outing': James Baldwin's Revisions of Gide's Sexual Politics," *Melus* 22, no. 1 (spring 1997): 8.

²⁹ Emmanuel Nelson, "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction," *Journal Of American Culture* 14 (1991): 91.

the ways in which Baldwin was preoccupied by his roles both as an artist and as a spokesman. In the mid-1960s in particular, Baldwin came under increasing attack by a new generation of radical black American writers, such as Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka, who criticised his writing--and in particular his fiction--for not being sufficiently politically engaged. As I discuss in Chapter Three, Baldwin was hounded by charges that *Another Country* not only focussed on the individual (at a time when collective solidarity was called for), but that his work suggested that the power of love could unseat racial oppression. Importantly, criticism of Baldwin's political ineffectiveness was directly bound to the public knowledge of his sexual orientation. Although Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is careful to point out that Black Nationalism did not have a unique claim on homophobia, he rightly discusses the ways in which "national identity became sexualized in the 1960s, in such a way to engender a curious connection between homophobia and nationalism."³⁰

The origins of what Gates refers to as the "curious connection between homophobia and

³⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Black Man's Burden," *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael

nationalism," have a complicated history that I want to consider briefly before examining Baldwin's own position as an openly gay black writer. Whilst I acknowledge Cheryl Clarke's admonishment that the black community is too frequently pilloried for its homophobia, I argue that Baldwin's insistence on privacy in relation to discussions of homosexuality came directly out of increasing attacks on his authority as a (homosexual) racial spokesman.³¹ And yet Baldwin's distinctions between the public and the private spheres are difficult to constitute. Although Baldwin largely leaves his depictions of homosexuality to his fiction, his widely available novels of the 1960s hardly constitute a private sphere. In addition, I later make the point that his novels, whilst more candid about homosexuality than his essays, are by no means unproblematic as works of gay fiction. Not only does Baldwin frame each homosexual relationship within a history of bisexuality, but his negative depictions of homosexual subculture led a number of critics to

Warner (London & Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 234.

³¹ Cheryl Clarke, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (1983; reprint, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 198; see also bell hooks, "Homophobia in Black Communities," *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles & New York: Alyson Books, 2001), 67-73.

conclude that Baldwin's fiction was actually critical of male homosexual practice.

1. Black Nationalism, Homophobia and the Role of the Artist

According to James Campbell, Baldwin's "value to the [civil rights] movement was mainly symbolic."³² Commissioned by *Harper's* magazine in 1957, Baldwin wrote emotionally about his first visit to the South and his meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr.³³ After a second visit to the South in 1960, Baldwin became more actively involved in the Civil Rights struggle through work with the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.), an organisation--along with the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.)--that he later became a member of.³⁴ Tired of sojourning in France, "polishing my fingernails," as he recalled, Baldwin's new involvement in the South ignited in him a new political commitment: "I realized what tremendous

³² Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, 175.

³³ This account was reprinted as "A Fly in Buttermilk," *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* [1964] (London: Penguin, 1991), 76-87; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Nobody Knows*.

³⁴ Leeming, 175.

things were happening," Baldwin averred, "and that I did have a role to play."³⁵

Baldwin's role as writer/ reporter was indeed unique. Richard Wright, whose success had dwindled in the early 1960s, remained in France, and neither Ralph Ellison nor Langston Hughes played a significant role in writing of the civil rights era. With the success of *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin commanded a large and receptive audience, which he used to arrange a meeting with the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy.³⁶ But even as Baldwin courted more involvement with the civil rights movement, there were whispers of his misinformed views, and aspersion was cast on his ability--and suitability--as a race leader. Martin Luther King, for example, in a conversation secretly recorded by the F.B.I., expressed his reluctance in attending a television programme with Baldwin. According to the F.B.I. report, King was "not enthusiastic about the idea because he felt that Baldwin was uninformed regarding his movement," a view that he maintained by excluding an eager Baldwin from

³⁵ Campbell, *Talking At the Gates*, 125.

³⁶ For a detailed account of this meeting, which included Lorraine Hansberry and the white actor Rip Torn, see Campbell, *Talking At the Gates*, 163-179. According to Campbell, the meeting failed "to achieve anything significant" (165).

speaking at the March on Washington in August 1963.³⁷ Echoing King, Harold Cruse concluded that Baldwin's contribution to the meeting with Kennedy was ineffectual, evincing the writer's "intellectual inconsistencies," and his refusal or inability to engage with "sociology and economics jazz."³⁸

Although Baldwin would later explore his problematic role as both writer and spokesman in *Tell me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), emphatically telling *Mademoiselle* Magazine in 1969 that "I am not a public speaker. I am an artist," his sexuality played a crucial and significant role in the deliberate downplaying of his involvement with civil rights.³⁹ According to Morris Dickstein,

The crucial charges against Baldwin had little to do with his politics, or his literary craftsmanship, or even, for that matter, his precise position on the race questions. The argument was that Baldwin's homosexuality, his unconfident masculinity, is the hidden root of all

³⁷ James Campbell, "I Heard it Through the Grapevine," *Granta* 73 (spring 2001): 175.

³⁸ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (1967; reprint with a foreword by Bazel E. Allen and Ernest J. Wilson III, New York: Quill, 1984), 194; Cruse also notes Norman Podhoretz's attempts to get Baldwin "off that personal kick and make him talk about solutions and programs," which failed (194).

³⁹ Even Auchinloss and Nancy Lynch, "Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin--an Interview," *Conversations with Baldwin*, 81.

his writing and completely disqualifies him as a representative spokesman.⁴⁰

Evidence of how his sexuality undermined his authority as a racial spokesman is clearly illustrated by an issue of *Time* magazine in May 1963. Whilst the photograph of Baldwin on the cover testifies to a politically engaged African-American writer at the height of his success, the article overtly undermined his authority as a racial spokesman. Not only did it emphatically state that Baldwin is "not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Negro leader," but the article tacitly emphasised Baldwin's effeminacy as a euphemism for homosexuality: Baldwin is described as a "nervous, slight, almost fragile figure, filled with frets and fears. He is effeminate in manner."⁴¹ By framing him as weak, and by alluding to his sexuality, the *Time* article implicitly suggests that Baldwin is not threatening to its white readership, a point explicitly made by Calvin Hernton and Stanley Crouch.

⁴⁰ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), 168.

⁴¹ "Races: Freedom--Now," *Time* 81, no. 20 (17 May 1963): 26; see also Jean François Gounard, *The Racial Problem in the Works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin*, trans. Joseph J. Rodgers, Jr., foreword by Jean F. Béranger (London & Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), who notes that Baldwin's upbringing gave him "an unpredictable temperament. It made him a sensitive and nervous person. Thus the slightest event could have surprising effects on him" (149-50); see also Calvin C. Hernton, *White Papers For White Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), who writes that it "is immensely revealing that the first Negro to get his face on a

Hernton's brief discussion of the *Time* article concludes that white Americans love Baldwin because of his "lack of 'masculine aggressiveness,'" adding that he is "a sweet, exotic black boy who cries for mother love."⁴²

Time's derisive caption could only have exacerbated Baldwin's problematic position, where it was common knowledge that he was nicknamed "Martin Luther Queen," with the implication that a "queen" could not participate in the violent and manly battle for civil rights, which several members of King's camp expressed directly.⁴³ King's lawyer, for example, Clarence Jones, whose telephone was wiretapped by the F.B.I., stated in a conversation that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.) had a respectable reputation and "could hardly afford to have candid homosexuals close to the seat of power."⁴⁴ Similarly, King's right-hand man, Barry Levinson, expressed his view that Baldwin and Bayard Rustin (a King aide later dismissed for his homosexuality), were

full page of the very feminine *Harper's Bazaar* (April 1963) is James Baldwin" (120).

⁴² See Stanley Crouch "Chitlins at the Waldorf: the Work of Albert Murray," 113; Hernton, *White Papers*, 119.

⁴³ For an insightful discussion of the term "queen," see Lee Edelman, "The Part for the (W) hole: Baldwin, Homophobia and the Fantasmatics of 'Race,'" *Homographies: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), esp. 42-4.

⁴⁴ Campbell, "I Heard it Through the Grapevine:" 171.

"better qualified to lead a homo-sexual movement than a civil rights movement."⁴⁵

Although knowledge of Baldwin's sexuality directly hindered his involvement with the S.C.L.C., by 1964 King's own message of nonviolence and Christian love was increasingly viewed as weak and ineffective. As Erika Doss has cogently documented, after the civil rights act of spring 1964, notions of "conciliation and meditation," were soon rejected as ineffectual.⁴⁶ Disillusioned with the lack of political gain, both white and black activists turned their attention to the North, vying, as Doss outlines, for "consciousness raising and cultural awareness."⁴⁷ Importantly, King's Southern message of tolerance was quickly dismissed. There was a new arena in the North that fostered more radical and violent ideologies.

For younger black radicals such as Eldridge Cleaver, King's message of non-violence had become "a stubborn and persistent stumbling block in the path of the methods that had to be implemented to bring about a revolution in the present situation."⁴⁸ In contrast to King's emphasis on the good book, Cleaver notes how

⁴⁵ Campbell, "I Heard it Through the Grapevine:" 171.

⁴⁶ Erika Doss, "Imaging the Panthers: Representing Black Power and Masculinity, 1960s-1990s," *Prospects* 23 (1998): 486.

⁴⁷ Doss: 488.

Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was now known as "the Bible."⁴⁹ The time for Christian love and tolerance had been exhausted. According to one member of the Berkley campus C.O.R.E. organisation, "[a] new leadership is emerging which reflects the aspirations of the urban Negro. . . . Yesterday's militants--like King and Rustin are the new Uncle Toms."⁵⁰

Baldwin's alignment with the sinking radical ship of Martin Luther King--what Cleaver referred to as his "Martin Luther King-type self-effacing love of his oppressors"--is crucial to an understanding of Baldwin's subsequent development as a writer.⁵¹ As Cheryl Clarke and others cultural critics have shown, the mid-1960s "marked a resurgence of radical black consciousness . . . [which included] rejecting the values of WASP America and embracing our African and Afro-American traditions and culture."⁵² Importantly, a rejection of white values included a repudiation of homosexuality, a phenomenon, as I discuss in Chapter Two that increasingly became viewed as a white

⁴⁸ Eldridge Cleaver, "The Death of Martin Luther King," *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches*, ed. and introd. Robert Scheer (New York: Random House, 1969), 73.

⁴⁹ Cleaver, "Psychology: The New Black Bible," *Post-Prison Writings*, 18; Cleaver argues that Fanon's book "legitimize[s] the revolutionary impulse to violence" (20).

⁵⁰ Doss: 478.

⁵¹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, introd. Maxwell Geismar (New York, etc.: Ramparts, 1968), 106; hereafter abbreviated as *SOI*.

⁵² Clarke, 191.

aberration.⁵³ Not only that, but black political action became increasingly gendered and sexualised. King, as Michelle Wallace has argued, "represented a glaring impossibility--a dream of masculine softness and beauty, an almost feminine man."⁵⁴

This important political shift in the mid-1960s, which became the Black Power Movement, resulted in an attempt to homogenise both political views and identity categories.⁵⁵ As Cheryl Clarke has noted, "[i]n order to participate in the movement one had to be black (of course), be male-orientated, and embrace a spectrum of black nationalist, separatist, Pan Africanist sentiments, beliefs, and goals."⁵⁶ Crucially, you also had to be heterosexual, and it helped if you were young.⁵⁷ For the middle-aged and homosexual Baldwin, it was not easy to gain membership of this club. "Baldwin, who once defined the cutting edge," Gates has noted, "was now a favourite target

⁵³ King's chief-of-staff, Bayard Rustin was dismissed under the guise of his left wing commitments but mainly on account of his homosexuality. See W.J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (London: Michael Joseph, 1990), 143; see also Reginald Lockett, "Die Black Pervert," *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1968), 354.

⁵⁴ Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978; reprint with a new introd. by Wallace, New York: Dial Press, 1990), 37.

⁵⁵ See Harper, esp. 165-6.

⁵⁶ Clarke, 191.

⁵⁷ See Cleaver, "Stanford Speech," *Post-Prison Writings*, who notes that at 38, he was the oldest Panther (125); see also James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis," *New*

for the new cutting edge."⁵⁸ "Like Martin Luther King," Michelle Wallace averred, "Baldwin was an anachronism come the sixties; but unlike King he was not conveniently murdered, so they had to dispose of him some other way."⁵⁹ The "other way," as I argue, deeply affected both Baldwin's depictions of homosexuality and subsequent political shifts.

As the political arena shifted dramatically from 1965, Baldwin was faced with a new strand of black radicalism. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed in 1966, proselytising a well-crafted message of potent masculinity and patriarchy, acutely illustrated by the symbols of the panther and the gun.⁶⁰ The Black Power Movement, as Michelle Wallace, has reiterated, increasingly became synonymous with "the pursuit for manhood," a point that Eldridge Cleaver made explicit in an interview with Nat Hentoff in 1968.⁶¹ According to Cleaver, the Black Panther Party "supplies very badly needed standards of masculinity," adding that "all the young chicks in the

York Review of Books 15, no. 2 (7 January 1971) where he acknowledges George Jackson's dismissal of his generation (15).

⁵⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Welcome Table," *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, ed. and introd. Gerald Early (London & New York: Allen Lane, 1993), 153.

⁵⁹ Wallace, 59.

⁶⁰ For a useful overview of how the Black Panthers took over from the ailing political impact of the Nation of Islam, see Cleaver, "The Decline of the Black Muslims," *Post-Prison Writings*, 13-17.

⁶¹ Wallace, 33.

black community nowadays relate to the young men who are Black Panthers."⁶²

Cleaver's assumption about male and female heterosexuality, and his emphasis on masculinity are illustrative of the Black Power Movement's increasingly intolerant ideology. As Erica Doss has cogently outlined:

by aligning black masculinity with symbols and styles traditionally associated with potent white masculinity, the Panthers also reinscribed the most egregious forms of patriarchal privilege and domination, from machismo and misogyny to violence and aggression. Their heterosexist and homophobic brand of revolutionary black nationalism excluded black women and homosexuals, and limited the context of black liberation and black power to conflicts over the definition and manifestation of black masculinity.⁶³

Doss's emphasis on the increasingly homogeneous inscription of black masculinity points to the ways in which women--and in particular--homosexuals were increasingly scapegoated during the 1960s. As Ron Simmons and other critics have convincingly argued,

⁶² Cleaver, "Playboy interview with Nat Hentoff," *Post-Prison Writings*, 203.

homophobia in the black community traditionally "reinforces a false sense of manhood."⁶⁴ By delineating what is acceptable in male black subjectivity--and what is not--homophobia, according to Robert Reid-Pharr humanises the aggressors: "[t]o strike the homosexual, the scapegoat, the sign of chaos and crisis, is to return the community to normality, to create boundaries around Blackness, rights that indeed white men are obliged to recognize."⁶⁵

Reid-Pharr's view is illustrated by Eldridge Cleaver's description of "Punk Hunting," an urban ritual that involves seeking out and targeting homosexuals in the community. Cleaver describes "punk hunting" as the need to "satisfy some savage impulse to inflict pain on the specific target, the 'social outcast' . . ." What is most revealing is Cleaver's choice of analogy. Punk hunting, Cleaver asserts, "seems to be not unrelated . . . to the ritualistic lynchings and castrations inflicted on Southern blacks by Southern whites" (*SOI*, 106). By aligning himself with white lynchers--who historically sought to

⁶³ Doss: 493.

⁶⁴ Ron Simmons, "Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Intellectuals," *Brother to Brother*, 223; see also Marlon Riggs, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen," *Brother to Brother*, esp. 254.

⁶⁵ Robert Reid-Pharr, "'Tearing the Goat's Flesh': Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of a Late Twentieth Century Masculinity," *Studies in the Novel* 28, no. 3 (1996): 373-4.

scapegoat alleged black sexual transgressors--Cleaver reproduces what bell hooks has referred to as black resistance's equation of "freedom with manhood." By sharing white patriarchy's belief in the "erect phallus," the Black Power Movement, hooks contends, "forged a bond between oppressed men and their white male oppressors."⁶⁶

Further evidence of Baldwin's scapegoating is highlighted by a 1967 edition of the Black Panther Magazine, which featured Emory Douglas's picture, titled "bootlickers gallery." In this cartoon, photographs of Baldwin, Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King, Jr. are placed subjacent to a picture of a prostrate black man, who is licking the cowboy boots of President Lyndon Johnson.⁶⁷

The framing of Baldwin parallels *Time's* undermining of his suitability as a racial spokesman. In this cartoon, the image of a prostrate "bootlicker" illustrates the ways in which the Black Power Movement increasingly came to view "passivity" (i.e. non-aggression) with Uncle Tom behaviour, which in turn became synonymous with homosexuality.⁶⁸ In Amiri

⁶⁶ bell hooks, "Reflections on Race and Sex," *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 58.

⁶⁷ Doss: 496.

⁶⁸ See Cleaver, "Stanford Speech," *Post-Prison Writing*, where he states that black people "have turned away from the bootlicking leadership" (116).

Baraka's poem, "Black Art," for example, he describes the "negro leader on the steps of the White House-- kneeling between the sheriff's thigh negotiating coolly for his people."⁶⁹ Echoing Baraka's undisguised disgust at the negro leader's passivity and kow-towing, Eldridge Cleaver forcefully condemned Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, derogating the depiction of Rufus Scott. For Cleaver, Rufus is "a pathetic wretch . . . who let a white bisexual fuck him in the ass . . . [and] was the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to a white man" (*SOI*, 107).

By emphasising Rufus's submission, Cleaver conflates black homosexuality with his dubious views on the powerlessness of African-American women. More specifically, as Wallace has noted, Cleaver reduces black homosexuals "to the status of our black grandmothers who, as everyone knows, were fucked by white men all the time."⁷⁰ But if Cleaver suggests that power is enacted through fucking, then, as Wallace mischievously points out, might we not consider the black homosexual who fucks the white man as the most

⁶⁹ LeRoi Jones, "Black Art," *Black Fire*, 302.

⁷⁰ Wallace, 68; see Clarke, who argues that Wallace does not debunk this view of homosexuality (197); see also Edelman, who notes the pervasiveness in African-American literature of the black man who is forced to submit to sex by a white male. Rather portrayed "as 'being' homosexual," he notes that homosexuality is depicted as "the conflictual undoing of one man's authority by another" (54).

revolutionary of all? "If whom you fuck indicates your power," Wallace argues, "then obviously the greatest power would be gained by fucking a white man first, a black man second, a white woman third and a black woman not at all. The most important rule is that nobody fucks you."⁷¹

In Baraka and Cleaver's framework, however, ultimate power is gained by raping white women. For Cleaver, rape is explicitly "an insurrectionary act." By raping white women, Cleaver maintains that he "was defying and trampling on the white man's law . . . because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man had used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge" (*SOI*, 14). Cleaver's act of revenge is rooted in the African-American man's historical lack of authority during slavery. As Robert Staples has documented, "[m]asculinity, as defined in this culture, has always implied a certain autonomy over and mastery of one's environment."⁷² During slavery, as Staples outlines, African-American men had no legal authority over their wives and children, which accentuated a sense of emasculation. According to Cleaver, the legacy of psycho-sexual damage can be

⁷¹ Wallace, 68.

⁷² Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Man's Role in American Society* (San Francisco: Black Scholar, 1982), 2.

redressed through the reclamation of a pre-historical era. In his essay, "The Primeval Mitosis," Cleaver draws on Plato's *Symposium* to evoke a pre-social era in which the essence, the Primeval Sphere became divided; but unlike Plato, this division is between not three, but two parts, male and female. Each part, Cleaver continues, longs for the opposite sex in order to create a Unitary Sexual Image. Importantly, Cleaver argues that homosexuality disrupts the timeless process of synthesis: it is "the product of the fissure of society into antagonistic classes and a dying culture and civilization alienated from biology" (SOI, 177). This point is further illustrated by the necessary healing union with African-American women ("Black Beauty"): "Across the naked abyss of negated masculinity, of four hundred years minus my Balls, we face each other today, my Queen" (SOI,). Cleaver maintains that it is only through "re-love" of Black Beauty that his "manhood can be redeemed" (SOI, 207).

Cleaver's emphasis on the redemption and healing of a wounded masculinity not only framed "the pursuit of manhood" in exclusively heterosexual terms, but highlighted the increasingly pervasive move to redress the psycho-sexual crimes of slavery. During the mid-1960s, black masculinity was further damaged by the controversial findings in 1965 of what became known as

the Moynihan Report. Concluding that the black family suffered from an "abnormal family structure," the report suggested that African-American suffered less from racism, and more from the dominant presence of black women.⁷³

The complicated and competing images of masculinity highlight the difficult position that Baldwin faced. On the one hand, as Lee Edelman has noted, "[o]ne need not, of course, view patriarchy as itself a desideratum in order to recognize the destructiveness of a system that enshrined the paternal privilege . . . while at the same time disavowing the meaningfulness of the paternal relation for the slave."⁷⁴ But on the other hand, Cleaver's dichotomising of white and black as the (white) Omnipotent Administrator and the (black) Supermasculine menial, exacerbated psycho-sexual myths of the black male as primarily physical and libidinous, whilst at the same time replicating white patriarchal and homophobic values.

By deploying white patriarchy's dominant ideologies, Cleaver's account points towards the complex entanglement of race, sexism and homophobia.

⁷³ Wallace, 31; see Staples who contested the report's findings on matriarchy; see also his article, "The Myth of the Black Matriarch," *Black Scholar* (January 1970): 8-16.

As Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer have argued, black men have historically internalised and incorporated dominant images of masculinity in order to contest the powerlessness or racism, a point foregrounded by Alvin Poussain's discussion of the ways in which African-American men have tended "to adopt the attitudes of the dominant group toward black women."⁷⁵ What both cases reveal--and particularly with Cleaver's raping of white women--is the diaphanous line between the empowering act of reclamation, and the danger of perpetuating recalcitrant myths of black sexual appetite.

This complicated position is illustrated by the ways in which Baldwin's criticism of "black manhood" set him at odds with the Black Power Movement. Whereas Cleaver celebrates "the walking phallus of the Supermasculine Menial," Baldwin vociferously repudiates this image: "It is still true alas," Baldwin wrote in 1961, "that to be an American Negro male is also be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means one pays, in one's personality, for the

⁷⁴ Edelman, 48-9.

⁷⁵ Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Racism and the Politics of Masculinity," *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (1988; reprint, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 112; Staples, 64.

sexual insecurity of others."⁷⁶ Echoing Frantz Fanon's observation that the white gaze transforms black men so that "[h]e is turned into a penis. He is a penis," Hall Montana, Baldwin's narrator in *Just Above My Head*, bemoans that "its color was size."⁷⁷

Despite his conflict with Cleaver and others on the depiction of the black male, Baldwin continued to challenge and demystify myths of black sexual prowess. And yet, Cleaver's scabrous homophobic attack of Baldwin in *Soul on Ice* had a devastating effect on the older writer. Whilst Cleaver is not alone in his homophobic derogation of Baldwin, the severity of his attack produced a profound effect on Baldwin's writing. As late as 1984 Baldwin still spoke of trying to "undo the damage" that Cleaver had caused.⁷⁸ Henry Louis Gates recalls Baldwin's remark that "being attacked by white people only made him flare hotly into eloquence; being attacked by black people, he confessed, made him want to break down and cry."⁷⁹ According to W.J. Weatherby, Cleaver's attack was extremely "important to Baldwin's development," a key

⁷⁶ James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," *Nobody Knows*, 178.

⁷⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham, introd. Homi K. Bhabha [1952] (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 170; James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* [1978] (London: Penguin, 1994), 105.

⁷⁸ Jordan Elgrably and George Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction: James Baldwin," *Conversations with Baldwin*, 252.

moment that "helped to shape [Baldwin's] racial attitudes in middle age . . . making him re-examine his own situation."⁸⁰ Echoing Weatherby, Gates also notes that, in the aftermath of Cleaver's attack, Baldwin's essays "came to represent his official voice, the carefully crafted expression of the public intellectual, James Baldwin."⁸¹ Baldwin, as Dwight McBride convincingly argues, increasingly adopted the voice of "representative race man," which in turn led to a silencing--or at least dilution--of his depictions of homosexuality.⁸²

2. "The Sexual Question Comes After the Question of Color"

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., by the late 1960s "Baldwin bashing was almost a rite of initiation."⁸³ Middle-aged, homosexual and with inconsistent political views, Baldwin stood little chance against the fiery and youthful vitality of writers such as Ishmael Reed, who famously dismissed the older writer as "a hustler who comes on like

⁷⁹ Gates, "The Black Man's Burden," *Fear of a Queer Planet*, 233.

⁸⁰ Weatherby, 293.

⁸¹ Gates, "The Welcome Table," *Lure and Loathing*, 159.

⁸² Dwight McBride, "Can the Queen Speak? Racial Essentialism, Sexuality and the Voice of Authority," *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 10.

Job."⁸⁴ But even as the younger writers of the Black Power Movement increasingly scapegoated Baldwin, the older writer--at least publicly--refused to fire back. In fact, as I argue in this section, during the late 1960s until the late 1970s, Baldwin was not only taciturn about the subject of homosexuality, but his language increasingly adopted a new radical rhetoric, particularly in his long essay, *No Name on the Street*, published in 1972, but begun in 1967.⁸⁵ In this section I examine Baldwin's repeated assertions that "the sexual question comes after the question of color."⁸⁶ I argue that Baldwin's move away from the subject of homosexuality came directly out of the criticism that he received by African-American writers such as Eldridge Cleaver; this in turn, I show, led to Baldwin's increasing anxiety over his role as both an artist and a spokesman.

Despite the suggestion by Gates and Campbell that his involvement with the Black Power Movement was symbolic and derivative, it is clear from Baldwin's writing of the late 1960s and early 1970s that he was committed to radical change and that he had become

⁸³ Gates, "The Welcome Table," *Lure and Loathing*, 154.

⁸⁴ Gates, "The Welcome Table," *Lure and Loathing*, 153.

⁸⁵ See Campbell, *Talking At the Gates*, who notes that "it seems safe to quote Baldwin's remarks on certain events as if they were written at the time" (219).

⁸⁶ Goldstein: 14.

deeply disillusioned. "Since Martin's death, in Memphis," Baldwin wrote in *No Name in the Street*, "and that tremendous day in Atlanta, something has altered in me, something has gone away."⁸⁷ Gone were Baldwin's more optimistic statements about the need for love between black and white people, a point I discuss in Chapter Three. In an essay on the head of the S.N.C.C., Stokely Carmichael, Baldwin described the shift in the young leader's ideology in terms that are readily applicable to Baldwin himself: "Stokely did not begin his career with dreams of terror," Baldwin wrote, "but with dreams of love. Now he's saying, and he's not alone, and he's not the first, if I can't live here, well neither will you."⁸⁸ Having fervently supported King's March on Washington, Baldwin later agreed with Malcolm X that the demonstration was in fact "a sell-out" (*NNOS*, 523). Although Gates is a little harsh when he claims that "Baldwin's reverence for Malcolm was real, but posthumous," by 1972, seven years after Malcolm X's assassination, Baldwin's recollection of the Nation of Islam Minister borders on hagiography: "Malcolm, finally, was a genuine

⁸⁷ James Baldwin, "No Name on the Street," *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1985), 453; hereafter abbreviated as *NNOS*.

⁸⁸ James Baldwin, "From Dreams of Love to Dreams of Despair," *Natural Enemies???: Youth and the Clash of Generations*, ed.

revolutionary," Baldwin recalled in *No Name on the Street*, adding that "[i]n some church someday . . . he will be hailed as a saint" (*NNOS*, 499).⁸⁹

But if Baldwin's support of Malcolm was, to a certain extent, retrospective, then he was eager to lend his support to the Black Power movement that had so readily dismissed him.⁹⁰ Baldwin, as James Campbell recalls, "embraced the Panthers."⁹¹ Striking a close and lasting relationship with the chairman of the Black Panther Party, Bobby Seale, Baldwin went on to write an introduction to his second book, and also hosted a birthday party for the incarcerated Panther leader Huey Newton (*NNOS*, 532). Although the project was never completed, Baldwin also began work in Hollywood on a film script of the life of Malcolm X in 1968, which was eventually published in 1972 as *One Day When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on the Autobiography of Malcolm X*.⁹²

In sharp contrast to his earlier more poetic language, came a new radical rhetoric that sounded borrowed and unsure in Baldwin's florid pen. The

Alexander Klein (New York & Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1967), 278.

⁸⁹ Gates, "The Welcome Table," *Lure and Loathing*, 156.

⁹⁰ See Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, who notes that Baldwin "said little that was positive about Malcolm X . . . until Malcolm was killed" (219).

⁹¹ Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, 219.

⁹² See Leeming, 284, 288, 299, 301-3, 306, 313.

writer who had once famously claimed that he had to appropriate white culture, invoking Chartres Cathedral, Descartes and Shakespeare, now vehemently argued that the "South African coal miner, or the African digging for roots . . . have no reason to bow down before Shakespeare, or Descartes . . . or the Cathedral at Chartres" (*NNOS*, 473).⁹³ Not only did Baldwin openly support the Panthers, proclaiming, for example, that African-American prisoners had never received a fair trial, but he increasingly referred to himself as a black radical writer (*NNOS*, 507).⁹⁴ After *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin's writing, according to Stanley Crouch, "began to espouse the kinds of simplistic conceptions Malcolm X became famous for."⁹⁵

Baldwin's claim that he had, upon his arrival in Paris, lived with "les misérables," (Algerians) was a blatant rewriting of his first years in the French capital, a period that he spent largely with white writers.⁹⁶ If Baldwin rewrote his past to suggest a more radical political engagement, then he was no less

⁹³ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes of a Native Son* [1955] (London: Penguin, 1995), 14; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Notes*.

⁹⁴ See also James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (New York: Dell, 1971), 64.

⁹⁵ Stanley Crouch, "The Rage of Race," *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979-1989* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 234.

⁹⁶ See Campbell, *Talking at the Gates* who notes that Baldwin romanticises this period of his life (247-8).

self-conscious about his present situation. In *No Name on the Street*, only four years after Cleaver's violent dismissal of his political ineffectiveness, Baldwin refers to a disagreement with a young black militant woman, concluding that the scene "rather checked the company, which had not imagined that I and a black militant could possibly disagree about anything" (*NNOS*, 457). A few years earlier, Baldwin had been dismissed because few black militants thought he could possibly agree with them about anything. Again in *No Name*, Baldwin is anxious to inflate and maintain his new radical persona: recollecting that the British Immigration considered him to be a "persona non grata"--with the implication that he was too politically dangerous--Baldwin describes how the British authorities had "had thrown Stokely [Carmichael] out a week before," in a desperate attempt to authenticate his political daring (*NNOS*, 496).

Importantly, Baldwin's language increasingly borrowed from the pervasive heterosexist and machismo language of the Black Power Movement. According to the new Baldwin, the moment when Bobby Seale proclaimed Huey Newton as "the baddest motherfucker in history," was an act which "restored to the men and women of the ghetto their honour," a language that strongly mirrors

Cleaver's declaration that "I cannot help but say that Huey P. Newton is the baddest motherfucker ever to set foot in history" (*NNOS*, 536).⁹⁷ Although Baldwin stated that "I do not carry a gun and do not consider myself to be a violent man," he began to claim that his life had "more than once depended on the gun in a brother's holster" (*NNOS*, 550). Dialogue, the master of words now proclaimed, was no longer possible: "it is not necessary for a black man to hate a white man, or to have any particular feelings about him at all, in order to realize that he must kill him" (*NNOS*, 550).⁹⁸ This new Baldwinian rhetoric sounded less and less like the author of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, and more and more like the borrowed rhetoric of black radical writers. Baldwin's comment in "Notes for Blues" that "I hate them [white people] and would be willing to kill them," echoes Calvin Hernton's conclusion that "only violence . . . will at once be the tool of liberation," or Cleaver who stated that,

⁹⁷ Cleaver, "Introduction to the Biography of Huey P. Newton," *Post-Prison Writing*, 41.

⁹⁸ See also, "Conversation: Ida Lewis and James Baldwin," [1970] *Conversations with Baldwin*, where JB states that with the deaths of Malcolm X and King, "dialogue is gone" (85); see also Cleaver, "Stanford Speech," *Post-Prison Writing*, where he states that "words are becoming more and more irrelevant" (114).

"[i]n order to bring this situation about, black men know that they must pick up the gun"99

Baldwin's exhortation that it might be necessary to kill white people recollects Philip Harper's discussion (above) of the ways in which the Black Power Movement aligned liberation with an aggressive and heterosexual masculinity. Not surprisingly, Baldwin's new self-proclaimed radicalism also tempered his discussion of homosexuality as he entered the arena of black macho, a point insightfully made by Stanley Crouch. According to Crouch, Baldwin's fascination with militancy and "increasing virulence had perhaps more than a bit to do with his homosexuality."¹⁰⁰ Baldwin began to dismiss "most American intellectuals," on account of what he "observed of their manhood," an observation that is framed in a language not dissimilar from Cleaver's derogation of Baldwin (*NVOS*, 464). Although Baldwin did not go as far as Ossie Davis, who proclaimed Malcolm X as "our living manhood," Baldwin began to commemorate the assassinated leader as "a genuine revolutionary, a virile impulse long since fled from

⁹⁹ James Baldwin, "Notes for Blues," *Blues For Mister Charlie* [1964] (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), xiv; Calvin C. Hernton, "Dynamite Growing Out of Their Skulls," *Black Fire*, 101; Cleaver, "The Land Question and Black Liberation," *Post-Prison Writings*, 72.

¹⁰⁰ Crouch, "Race Rage," *Notes of a Hanging Judge*, 234.

the American way of life" (NNOS, 499; emphasis mine; SOI, 60). Baldwin peppered his essays with discussions of how slavery "emasculated them [slaves] of any human responsibility," arguing that "a man without balls is not a man" (NNOS, 482).

By repeatedly emphasising the African-American male's loss of manhood, Baldwin, as Michelle Wallace wryly pointed out, "had finally seen the light." Baldwin's work, Wallace argued, in fact "laid the groundwork for the deification of the genitals that would later characterize the prose of the Black Movement."¹⁰¹ In short, Wallace argued that Baldwin had imbibed the Black Power rhetoric that the "black man's sexuality and the physical fact of his penis were the major evidence of his manhood and the purpose of it."¹⁰²

Whilst Wallace's judgement of Baldwin may seem too pronounced, it illustrates the ways in which Baldwin was viewed as an anachronism, but also the ways in which the Black Power Movement was indebted to his rhetoric.¹⁰³ Cleaver's book of essays, *Soul on Ice*,

¹⁰¹ Wallace, 60, 62.

¹⁰² Wallace, 62.

¹⁰³ For examples of Baldwin's emphasis on black manhood and disagreements with black female radicals, see "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde," *Essence* 15 (December 1984): 72-4, 129-33; see also James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, foreword by Ida Lewis, afterword

with their blend of autobiography, history and politics was clearly inspired by the author he soon dismissed. According to Crouch, Baldwin was in fact "a seminal influence" on the likes of Carmichael, Rap Brown, LeRoi Jones and Cleaver.¹⁰⁴

Nowhere was Baldwin's influence to and by the Black Power Movement more acute than in his play, *Blues For Mister Charlie* (1964). According to Stanley Crouch, Baldwin's play, which was performed four months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, opened up the question of non-violence, whilst Amiri Baraka even claimed that *Blues* "announced the Black Arts Movement."¹⁰⁵ Whilst Baraka's eulogy of Baldwin may over-state the importance of Baldwin's play, contemporary reviewers were quick to point out the shift in register. In his review of *Blues*, Philip Roth criticised what he termed Baldwin's "sentimentalizing of masculinity," arguing that the play is "is a soap opera designed to illustrate the superiority of blacks over whites." Echoing Calvin Hernton's conclusion that *Blues* demonstrated "an aggressive, a masculine Baldwin," Roth argues that Baldwin suggests that

by Orde Coombs (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), esp. 7, 39-40, 41-2, 45, 49, 52-5.

¹⁰⁴ Crouch, "The Rage of Race," *Notes of a Hanging Judge*, 231.

¹⁰⁵ Crouch, "Meteor in a Black Hat," *Notes of a Hanging Judge*, 197; Amiri Baraka, "Jimmy!--James Arthur Baldwin," *Eulogies* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 96.

African-Americans, "even studious ones, make love better. They dance better. . . . And their penises are longer, or stiffer."¹⁰⁶

Why Baldwin dramatically changed his rhetoric is in part explained by his public acceptance of Cleaver's virulent attack on him on *Soul on Ice*. Rather than defending his position, Baldwin surprisingly writes that he "admired" Cleaver's book, writing--in what Gates terms "an exercise in willed magnanimity"--that Cleaver was "both vulnerable and rare" (*MNOS*, 539).¹⁰⁷ Baldwin, we learn, understood why Cleaver felt impelled to condemn him: "He seemed to feel that I was a dangerously odd, badly twisted, and fragile reed, of too much use to the Establishment to be trusted by blacks." Although Baldwin lamented that Cleaver used his "public reputation against me both naively and unjustly," his subsequent justification of Cleaver's homophobia not only exonerates Cleaver, but complicity borrows from his former critic's vocabulary: "I also felt I was confused in his mind with the unutterable debasement of the male--with all those faggots, punks, and sissies, the sight and sound of whom, in prison, must have made him vomit more than

¹⁰⁶ Philip Roth, "Blues For Mister Charlie," *Modern Critical Views: James Baldwin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 41; Hernton, *White Papers*, 131.

once" (*NNOS*, 539). By employing a rhetoric (faggots, punks, and sissies) that even the Black Panther Party had by then officially prohibited, Baldwin not only distinguishes his sexual preference from a more deviant and degenerate behaviour, but comes dangerously close to mimicking Cleaver's own homophobic diatribe.

Whilst Baldwin's writing shifted dramatically during the 1960s, it is important to emphasise that he experienced deep anxieties about his roles both as writer and revolutionary from the mid-1960s. Writing in *No Name on the Street*, Baldwin is clearly aware of the price he has paid to become a best-selling author. On the one hand, Baldwin acknowledges that his success had driven a wedge between himself and those he grew up with: the feeling was, Baldwin, averred, "that I had betrayed the people who had produced me" (*NNOS*, 455). Although Baldwin is anxious to write himself in the history of the Black Power Movement ("I will always consider myself among the greatly privileged because, however inadequately, I was there"), he also realises that many people will be sceptical about his role: "one marches in Montgomery, for example (in my own case) to sell one's books" (*NNOS*, 488, 459).

¹⁰⁷ Gates, "The Welcome Table," *Lure and Loathing*, 158.

Whilst I have focussed on his attempts to picture himself as a radical *picaro*, Baldwin was only too aware that he was a writer "of too much use to the Establishment to be trusted by blacks." As the most visible African-American writer of the 1960s, Baldwin was, as he admits, "the Great Black Hope of the Great White Father" (*NNOS*, 539, 498).¹⁰⁸ "The conflict," Baldwin recalled, "was simply between my life as a writer and my life--not spokesman exactly, but as public witness to the situation of black people. I had to play both roles" (*NNOS*, 513).

To conclude this section, I turn briefly to Baldwin's last novel of the 1960s, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968). Despite being arguably his least successful novel, *Tell Me* is an important work, both because the voice of the thespian narrator, Leo Proudhammer, is at times inseparable from Baldwin's, and because the novel illuminates and examines the writer's problematic roles during the 1960s.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ For an explanation of this term, which refers to the white search for a contender to beat the first black heavy weight champion, Jack Johnson, see Carlton Moss, "The Great White Hope," *A Freedomways Reader*, ed. Ernest Kaiser, foreword by James Baldwin (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 50-63.

¹⁰⁹ For example, see James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* [1968] (London: Penguin, 1994), where Leo recalls his relationship with a Harlem racketeer (210); compare this to his recollection in "Here Be Dragons," *The Price of the Ticket*, 681; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Price*; see also Leeming, 279-80.

As a successful actor, Leo is increasingly torn--like Baldwin--between his artistic and his political obligations. Compare, for example, Baldwin's acknowledgement in *No Name*: "what in the world was I by now but an aging, lonely, sexually dubious, politically outrageous, unspeakably erratic freak?," with Leo Proudhammer's conclusion that "[s]ome people considered me a faggot, for some I was a hero, for some I was a whore, for some I was a devious cocksman, for some I was an Uncle Tom" (*MNS*, 458).¹¹⁰ In particular I focus briefly on the minor but important character, Black Christopher, who is Proudhammer's lover in later life. By invoking a black radical character who is both homosexual and politically engaged, I argue that Baldwin attempted, towards the end of the 1960s, to reconcile his sexuality with a more fervent political role.

Reviews for *Tell Me* were little short of disastrous.¹¹¹ Irving Howe, in a scathing review, saw it as "the collapse of a writer of some distinction." For Howe, *Tell Me* was replete with "speechmaker's prose," a novel written to demonstrate Baldwin's new militant rhetoric, but one that resulted in "literary

¹¹⁰ James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, 382; hereafter abbreviated as *TMHL*.

¹¹¹ Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, 228.

suicide."¹¹² "They beating on black ass all the time," declares Leo's brother Caleb, "[d]on't nobody care what happens to a black man" (*TMHL*, 61). White people in the novel, as Campbell points out, are described variously as "'snooty,' 'bored,' distrustful,' 'dangerous,' 'brutally cruel,' 'successful and vocal Fascists,'" in contrast to the more positive, but no less generalised adjectives for African-Americans.¹¹³

Tell Me is an angry novel, full of despair and disillusionment. Religion, far from offering solace, has become a tool of the white establishment (a point I discuss in my final chapter): "Fuck Jesus," rails Christopher to Leo, "[t]hey didn't want to change their hearts, they just used him to change the map" (*TMHL*, 403). African-Americans, like Leo's father, are now turning not to religion, but to Black Nationalism (*TMHL*, 368). In sharp contrast to criticism that Baldwin offered love as a social and political palliative in *Another Country*, love in *Tell Me* is explicitly "not enough" to deal with the racism between Leo and his white lover, Barbara (*TMHL*, 298).¹¹⁴

¹¹² Irving Howe, "James Baldwin: At Ease in Apocalypse," *Harpers* 237 (September 1968): 95, 96, 100.

¹¹³ Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, 227.

¹¹⁴ See Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, where Baldwin notes that Leo was Rufus Scott, but without the suicide (228).

But if *Tell Me* exemplifies a new Baldwinian rhetoric of radicalism and even protest, then there is also a self-reflexive and brutal honesty to the narrative. We find this most acutely in the infrequent episodes between Leo--the middle-aged and ailing successful black actor--and "Black Christopher," the young Panther-esque radical, whose friends dress "in their Castro berets," "heavy boots," clutching works by Camus, Fanon and Mao (*TMHL*, 382). "I really would like," Leo implores Black Christopher, "to know more than I do about what's going on in the streets." Christopher's reply to Leo is that whilst "these cats are out here getting their ass whipped all the time . . . [when] You get your ass whipped, at least it gets into the papers" (*TMHL*, 402, 403). *Tell Me* is indeed a novel that oozes pathos, neatly summarised by Stuart Hall who concluded that the novel "was a meditation by a middle-aged black revolutionary on a revolution he has witnessed--but cannot, finally, share."¹¹⁵

Although *Tell Me* is more often than not dismissed and ignored by critics, I argue that the novel offers a useful insight into Baldwin's assertion that race is a more important issue than sexuality. Published in 1968, at the height of black nationalist fervour--and

¹¹⁵ Cited by Leeming, 281.

the same year as Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*--I want to suggest that *Tell Me* was Baldwin's attempt to reconcile his sexuality with black radical politics. Although critics such as James Giles have argued that Baldwin toned down the homosexuality in his later fiction to appease black critics, I want to argue that Baldwin hinted at the ideal of an erotic and revolutionary black companionship that was most keenly articulated by the French homosexual writer Jean Genet.¹¹⁶ By comparing Genet and Baldwin's involvement with the Panthers, I illustrate the extent that race, sexuality, and nationality figured in Baldwin's difficulty to immerse himself in black radical politics.

Although Black Christopher is only present in *Tell Me* for a dozen or so pages, he functions as a symbolic ideal for the ageing Leo. Whilst Christopher affectionately calls Leo his "dirty old man," there is never any explicit sexual interaction between the two men (*TMHL*, 373). In fact Baldwin is careful to distinguish the love between Leo and Christopher from the "degeneracy" of other artists, such as the "broken

¹¹⁶ James Giles, "Religious Alienation and 'Homosexual Consciousness' in *City of Night* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*," *College-English* 36 (1974): 378; see also Emmanuel Nelson, "The Novels of James Baldwin: Struggles For Self-Acceptance," *Journal of American Culture* 8, no. 4 (winter 1985), who suggests that JB

down British faggot" actor and "the faggot painter and his lesbian wife" (*TMHL*, 291, 316).¹¹⁷ Like most Baldwin protagonists, Leo is bisexual, and Christopher offers his "dirty old man," both physical protection and emotional security, functioning as both bodyguard and mother/ father-figure. Crucially, by naming Leo's lover *Black Christopher*, Baldwin offers an explicit rebuttal to the notion that homosexuality negates or dilutes blackness. Christopher, Leo ponders, "was black in many ways--black in colour, black in pride, black in rage" (*TMHL*, 68). Christopher, as his name homophonically suggests, is Leo's Black Christ, redolent with the homoeroticism of Countee Cullen's poem, "The Black Christ."¹¹⁸ Christopher is Baldwin's ideal for the late 1960s: a young and beautiful radical black man who combines tenderness with aggressive political action.

Baldwin's minor but important characterisation of Black Christopher is a quiet but subversive attack on Black Nationalism's homophobic and heterosexist ideology. By emphasising the homosociality of organisations such as the Black Panthers, Baldwin

tried to appease black militants by his negative portrayals of white homosexuality (15).

¹¹⁷ See also where Baldwin refers to a "poor white faggot" and "another faggot" (325).

¹¹⁸ Countee Cullen, *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1929), 69-110.

suggested the thin line between companionship, eroticism and love:

But my own instinct as the male relation, is that men, who are far more helpless than women . . . need each other as comrades . . . need each other for tears and ribaldry, need each other as models, need each other indeed, in sum, in order to be able to love women (TMHL, 81).

Baldwin's emphasis on the need for male companionship and love is illustrated most acutely by the idealised relationship of Black Christopher and Leo.

Importantly, this idea/ ideal was not articulated by Baldwin's public voice, through his essays or his interviews during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The public voice on the relationship between eroticism and revolution came, not from an African-American writer, but from a French homosexual writer, Jean Genet.

Given the vocal homophobia of the Black Panther Party, Genet's invitation to work with the Black Panthers in 1970 was little less than remarkable.¹¹⁹ Although some African-American radicals, such as the playwright Ed Bullins, dismissed Genet's "faggoty

¹¹⁹ See "Hubert Fichte Interviews Jean Genet," *Gay Sunshine Interviews*, vol. 1, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1978), 69.

ideas about Black Art, Revolution, and people," the French writer's sexuality was largely accepted.¹²⁰ In contrast to Baldwin, Genet's presence with the Panthers was both highly publicised and visible. Although both Baldwin and Genet--who were friends from the early 1950s--spoke together at the American Center in Paris in 1970 to defend George Jackson and the Panthers--Genet's output was far more prodigious.¹²¹ Whereas Genet was unprecedentedly soliciting interviews in well-known magazines and churning out publications, such as the collected essays, *Here and Now For Bobby Seale* (1970), *May Day Speech* (1970), the introduction to the prison letters of George Jackson, *Soledad Brother* (1970), and then later *Prisoner of Love* (1986), Baldwin was licking his wounds after Cleaver's vicious attack.¹²²

¹²⁰ Cited by White, 441. Occasionally Genet did provoke outrage: on one occasion, White notes that Genet "took too many Nembutals and danced in a pink negligée for Hilliard and three other Panthers" (529).

¹²¹ See White who notes that Baldwin and Genet often dined alone and frequented the same gay bar in Paris in the early 1950s. Baldwin was also a great admirer of *The Blacks* (439). For details of their collaboration with the Panthers, see White, 544, 563; for details of Genet's input, see ch. 18, esp. 521-46; see also Jean Genet, *May Day Speech*, introd. Alan Ginsberg (San Francisco: City Lights, 1970); Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray, introd. Edmund White (London: Picador, 1989), esp. 41-9, 83-6, 213-20, 258-61.

¹²² Jean Genet, *Here and Now For Bobby Seale* (New York, 1970). White notes that Genet contacted a journalist from the widely-read magazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur* to discuss the plight of the Panthers; the interview was soon translated into English, German and Italian (539).

Still more surprising was Genet's repeated references to what he described as the irresistible eroticism of the Panthers.¹²³ Whilst Genet's declaration that he was "in love" with the Black Panthers curiously mirrors Cleaver's recollection that "I fell in love with the Black Panther Party," for Genet, as Jonathan Dollimore has argued, the Panther's eroticism was "inseparable from their politics and the challenge they presented to white America."¹²⁴ For, Genet, not only did the Panthers, like the Palestinians, exude "a very strong erotic charge," but he intimated that the Panthers were sexually drawn to one another.¹²⁵ According to Genet, the Panthers "consisted of magnetized bodies magnetizing one another," what he elsewhere referred to as "their whole block and tackle, [which] was much in evidence through their trousers."¹²⁶

Genet's emphasis on black manhood does little to shatter stereotypes of black sexual prowess, a point that Genet is only too aware of: "[i]f sexual images

¹²³ See Fichte, esp. 93.

¹²⁴ Fichte, 93; Cleaver, "The Courage to Kill: Meeting the Panthers," *Post-Prison Writings*, 23; Cleaver also describes his first meeting with the Panthers as "the most beautiful sight I had ever seen" (29); Dollimore, 353. For brief but useful overview of Genet's "revolutionary erotics," see Pascale Gattet, "Jean Genet's American Dream: The Black Panthers," *Literature and History* 1, no. 1 (spring 1992): 48-63.

¹²⁵ Fichte, 80.

¹²⁶ Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 126, 260.

keep cropping up it's because they're unavoidable, and because the sexual or erectile significance of the Party is self-evident."¹²⁷ But whilst Genet is complicit in the portrayal of black sexual stereotypes, he also emphasises the tenderness beneath the black machismo. David Hilliard, Genet repeated, was a mother to him, recalling that the Panther's kindness was "an education in affection."¹²⁸ Genet's emphasis on the Panthers' gentleness bears a striking resemblance to Baldwin's insistence that Stokely Carmichael had set out with a message of love. Malcolm X, Baldwin noted in *No Name* "was one of the gentlest people I have met" (*NNS*, 498). In *Tell Me How Long*, the militant Christopher cooks and shops for the ailing Leo, paralleling David Hilliard's role as "mother" to Genet. Genet's description of *Soledad Brother* as "a book, tough and sure, both a weapon of liberation and a love poem" could equally have come from Baldwin's pen.¹²⁹

Despite the similarities between Baldwin and Genet, the former, as I have illustrated, was largely circumscribed by the Black Power Movement. In contrast to Genet, Baldwin was seen less as a revolutionary,

¹²⁷ Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 259.

¹²⁸ Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, 260, 83.

and more--to a certain extent--as a source of poetic inspiration: both Angela Davis and Bobby Seale borrowed from Baldwin to create titles for their books.¹³⁰ Whereas the involvement with the Panthers gave Genet a new momentum and impetus to publish, the late 1960s is generally considered as Baldwin's demise.¹³¹ On the one hand, Baldwin was frequently criticised for being politically too vague, but I also want to emphasis that, unlike Genet, his sexuality was a direct hindrance to his contribution to black politics.¹³²

Genet's contrasting reception by the Panthers illustrates the ways in which Baldwin was hindered by his race, nationality and sexuality. Whereas Genet not only claimed identification with African-Americans, but stated that he was black, his nationality and colour enabled him to invoke this identity at will, just as he later identified with the plight of the

¹²⁹ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, foreword Jonathan Jackson, Jr., introd. Jean Genet [1970] (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 332.

¹³⁰ See Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* [1974] (London: The Women's Press, 1990) where she notes that she used part of Baldwin's open letter to her in 1970 to name her anthology *If They Come in the Morning* (306).

¹³¹ See Edmund White's introduction to *Prisoner of Love*, where he notes that "political action filled the void left in his life when he was awakened from his reverie as an artist" (ix).

¹³² See Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*, who cites criticism that Baldwin held a "vague position," in contrast to the Panthers (219); see also Gates, "The Welcome Table," where he states that "his [Baldwin's] arguments, richly nuanced and self-consciously

Palestinians.¹³³ Although Genet precipitated direct political action, such as Huey Newton's open letter "The Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements," in August 1970--which stated that "maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary"--Baldwin only solicited criticism of his sexuality.¹³⁴ The different responses to Baldwin and Genet are illustrated by the latter's account of how David Hilliard not only accepted Genet's sexuality, but stated "it would be great if all homosexuals would come twelve thousand kilometers to the defense of the Panthers."¹³⁵ Baldwin, too, had travelled twelve thousand kilometres from Paris to join the civil rights struggle, but Baldwin was also African-American.

The impact of the late 1960s and early 1970s on Baldwin is clearly illustrated by his first novel of the new decade, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). Not surprisingly, given the homophobia that Baldwin experienced, this is his first novel that deals exclusively with heterosexual relationships, and his

ambivalent, were far too complex to serve straightforwardly political ends" (150).

¹³³ See Fichte, where Genet says, "[p]erhaps I'm a black with white or pink skin, but I'm a black" (75).

¹³⁴ Cited by White, 528. The open letter was published in the Black Panther Magazine (15 August, 1970). See Fichte, where Genet claims that he told Bobby Seale that if he attacked homosexuals, he would attack black Americans. According to Genet, Newton's letter was published one week later (93).

¹³⁵ Fichte, 92.

first to use a female narrator. In rhetoric reminiscent of *Tell Me How Long*, the characters, according to Michelle Wallace "positively gush the dogma of the Black Movement."¹³⁶ In contrast to the period until circa 1963 (with the publication of *Another Country*), Baldwin was increasingly less vocal about the subject of sexuality, both in his fiction and his essays.

Baldwin's increasing silence on the subject of homosexuality from the mid-1960s can in part be explained by the continuing homophobic response to his work. In a review of Baldwin's last novel, *Just Above My Head* (which I examine in Chapter Four), Stanley Crouch is clearly unable to contain his disgust of homosexuality, as he writes of "plastic underwear," and collapsing "sphincter muscles." Importantly, Crouch explicitly states that "very few black Americans would connect it [homosexuality] with liberation."¹³⁷

Crouch's refusal to align homosexuality with liberation is stridently echoed two years later by the following passage from the manifesto presented at the First National Plenary Conference on Self-

¹³⁶ Wallace, 61-2.

¹³⁷ Stanley Crouch, "Cliches of Degradation," *The Village Voice* (29 October 1979): 39.

Determination. Only a decade after Newton's support and recognition of homosexuality's radical potential, the rhetoric is nakedly homophobic: "[r]evolutionary nationalists . . . cannot uphold homosexuality in the leadership of the Black Liberation . . . Homosexuality is a genocidal practice. . . ." ¹³⁸

Whilst homophobia in the African-American academy and community persisted, a number of pioneering writers began to address the issues of blackness and homosexuality in the early 1980s. In defiance of such homophobia as the Conference on Self-Determination, gay African-American writers proclaimed that "Black Men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties." ¹³⁹ Although Emmanuel Nelson wrote in 1990 that "no systematic study of homophobia amongst African-Americans yet exists," arguing that no sustained criticism on Baldwin had yet "explored in close detail the impact of Baldwin's racial awareness and his homosexual consciousness on his literary imagination," the rise of gay studies within the academy since the early 1980s has ensured a number of pioneering works on black and gay writers. ¹⁴⁰ Works such as Michael Smith's *Black Men/ White Men: A Gay*

¹³⁸ Cited by Nelson, "Critical Deviance:" 92.

¹³⁹ Joseph Beam, "Brother to Brother: Words From the Heart," *In the Life*, 240.

Anthology (1983), Joseph Beam's collection, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), Randal Kenan's novel *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and the work of Marlon Riggs have opened up discussions of black and gay writing.¹⁴¹

This important impetus in black gay writing has contributed, as I noted in my introduction, to a call to examine Baldwin's work without privileging his ethnicity or his sexuality. However, as I have illustrated, Baldwin's comments and writing are replete with contradictions. In contrast to a number of gay African-American writers of the 1980s, Baldwin downplayed the effects of homophobia in the black community.¹⁴² Although Baldwin recalled in "Here Be Dragons," that on "every street corner I was called a faggot," he told Richard Goldstein that the term ("faggot") had "less venom," noting that he did not know of "anyone who has ever denied his brother because they were gay."¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Nelson, "Critical Deviance:" 91.

¹⁴¹ For a comprehensive bibliography of works by black gay men, see Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother*, 263-9; see also Nicholas Boggs, "Queer Black Studies: An Annotated Bibliography, 1994-1999," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (2000): 479-94.

¹⁴² See, for example, Marlon Riggs, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen," *Brother to Brother*, 253-7; also, Joseph Beam, "Brother to Brother: Words From the Heart," *In the Life*, 230-42.

¹⁴³ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 684; Goldstein: 13, 13-16.

Although Baldwin's fiction has been noted for its bold portrayal of homosexual relationships, it was not until 1968 with *Tell Me* that Baldwin depicted sexual relations between two black men in a novel, and not until his last novel that he explores a loving sexual relationship between African-American men. In fact, as David Bergman has pointed out, Baldwin is careful to frame his "homosexual" relationships through bisexuality, whether past or present, through such characters as David in *Giovanni's Room*, Rufus, Vivaldo and Eric in *Another Country* and Leo and Christopher in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*.¹⁴⁴ In *Just Above My Head*, although Arthur never sleeps with a woman, we are informed that he "slept with a lot of people--mostly men." Arthur, Baldwin writes, "was . . . nobody's faggot."¹⁴⁵ The negative term "faggot"--by which Baldwin means an effeminate homosexual and/ or one immersed in gay subculture--further problematises Baldwin's position as a progenitor of gay liberation. Whilst some writers such as Joseph Beam may have been inspired by Baldwin's depictions of black gay lives, others, such as the black gay science-fiction writer Samuel Delany, found his portraits far from

¹⁴⁴ See David Bergman, "The Agony of Gay Black Literature," *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representations in American Literature* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 165.

positive.¹⁴⁶ Whilst Delany acknowledges that Baldwin "at least, had talked about it," displaying "a certain personal honesty," he groups *Giovanni's Room* with other negative portrayals of homosexuality, such as the writing of Dr. Burgler and Havelock Ellis.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, although Emmanuel Nelson has pioneered a re-examination of Baldwin's portrayals of homosexuality, he concludes that *Giovanni's Room* evinced a Baldwin who had "not freed himself from the internalization of homophobic beliefs regarding the origins of male homosexual impulses."¹⁴⁸ And finally, for Donald Gibson, "[t]he fact of the matter is that Baldwin's attitude toward homosexuality is decidedly critical."¹⁴⁹ Bearing these contradictory accounts of Baldwin in mind, my final section examines Baldwin's three essays on homosexuality.

¹⁴⁵ Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*, 30.

¹⁴⁶ See Samuel R. Delany and Joseph Beam, "Samuel Delany: The Possibility of Possibilities," *In the Life*, 185-208, esp. 196.

¹⁴⁷ Samuel R. Delany and Joseph Beam, 197, 196.

¹⁴⁸ Emmanuel Nelson, "The Novels of James Baldwin:" 13; see also Carolyn Sylvander, *James Baldwin* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, Co, 1980), who notes that David is "a negative and confusing embodiment of the homosexual experience" (51).

¹⁴⁹ Donald Gibson, "James Baldwin: The Political Anatomy of Space," *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Therman B. O'Daniel (Washington: Howard University Press, 1977), 9.

3. Three Essays on Homosexuality: Baldwin's Holy Trinity

Although Baldwin only ever wrote three essays that focussed on homosexuality, there are dangers of grouping them together. Not only were two of the essays ("Preservation of Innocence" and "Here Be Dragons") published thirty-six years apart, but they were also published for different reasons in vastly different circumstances. Whilst "The Preservation of Innocence," was first published in an obscure literary journal in Paris, Baldwin's essay on Gide, "The Male Prison"--which first appeared as "Gide as Husband and Homosexual"--was a review commissioned by *New Leader* in 1954, then subsequently reprinted in *Nobody Knows My Name*. Again, in contrast to both "Preservation," and "Prison," "Here Be Dragons," was first published in *Playboy* under the title "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," and later collected in *The Price of the Ticket* (1985). Whilst "Preservation" and "Dragons" were published nearly four decades apart, I will, to a certain extent, put them in dialogue with one another. Despite being published in vastly different cultural and political times, "Dragons," begins with Baldwin's recollection of the period in his life before he left Greenwich Village for Paris (1948), and offers both

useful biographical information and commentary on early post-war sexual identity. But before I begin, I will briefly locate "Preservation," the most obscure of Baldwin's three essays, in the cultural and political climate that produced it. I will then argue that both "Preservation" and "Dragons" elucidate Baldwin's often surprising views on homosexuality, before examining "Prison" in some detail.

Unlike both "Dragons" and "Prison," "Preservation" was not republished in *The Price of the Ticket*, a book that purports to be Baldwin's collected non-fiction.¹⁵⁰ In contrast to the other two essays on homosexuality, "Preservation," is more often than not overlooked.¹⁵¹ According to Campbell, the first edition of *Zero* included contributions by notable authors such as Christopher Isherwood, William Carlos Williams, and Richard Wright.¹⁵² Baldwin, who had a contract with *Partisan Review*, (where it was also later published), decided to submit his essay, "Everybody's Protest

¹⁵⁰ However, in James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, selected by Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), it is reproduced (594-601).

¹⁵¹ See Bergman, who fails to cite "Preservation," in his discussion of Baldwin's essays on homosexuality (168); de Manet describes it as "a recently discovered essay" (3); "Preservation" was published for the first time in America in 1989 (*Out/Look* 2, no. 2 [fall 1998]: 40-5); but see, however, Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay/ Lesbian Almanac* (New York & Cambridge, etc.: Harper & Row, 1983), 647-51.

¹⁵² James Campbell, *Exiled in Paris: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett and Others on the Left Bank* (New York & London: Scribner, 1995), 22.

Novel" to the newly formed journal, publishing "The Preservation of Innocence" in the summer edition.¹⁵³ Baldwin's decision to publish with *Zero* has important implications. Although the journal was relatively obscure, circulating amongst about a thousand English-speaking literati, Baldwin's publications marked his entrance as an expatriate writer. Significantly, the first essay deals with African-American protest fiction--with no mention of sexuality--whilst the second essay focuses on homosexuality, with no allusion to race. As Mae Henderson has recently noted, "these essays are clearly analogues, one addressing the issue of representation of gender and race, and the other, the representation of gender and *sexuality*."¹⁵⁴

Why Baldwin felt impelled to address the questions of gender and sexuality in "Preservation" is in part illuminated by his recollection of the "season in hell," spent in Greenwich Village between the years of 1944-48. On the one hand, as I discuss in the following chapter, World War Two helped not only to fracture the nuclear family, but allowed unprecedented

¹⁵³ "Preservation," in contrast to "Everybody's Protest Novel," remains one of Baldwin's most obscure essays. In Fred and Nancy Standley's, *James Baldwin: a Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1980), there are ten references to articles that discuss "Everybody's," and none that discuss "Preservation" (290).

opportunities for employment and mobility. But whilst the war helped increase the visibility both of popular culture and sexual liberalism, tight lines were drawn between what was acceptable, and what was not.

According to cultural historians John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman:

As sexual liberalism took hold among the white middle class, it raised new issues for the maintenance of sexual order. . . . But as black urban communities grew, the black family and black sexual mores appeared as a convenient counterpoint, identifying the line between what was permissible and what was not.¹⁵⁵

Not only was deviant sexuality contrasted with an acceptable (i.e. heterosexual) identity, but as James A. Dievler has recently shown, "postwar culture fed the development of rigid identity categories in the postwar period," illustrated by mainstream discussions in existentialism and psychoanalysis about "the self," "identity," and "alienation."¹⁵⁶

The increasing rigidity of sexual and racial categories led Baldwin to note, both, as I have shown,

¹⁵⁴ Mae G. Henderson, "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and the Man's Estate," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (2000): 314.

¹⁵⁵ John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York & Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1988), 298.

that "on every street corner I was called a faggot," but also that the New York homosexual subculture could not contain or reflect his experience. Not only did Baldwin find that "many of the people I met were making fun of women," but "the queer . . . world was an even more intimidating area of this hall of areas." Although Baldwin acknowledges that he was "in the hall and present at this company," he recalls that "the mirrors threw back only brief and distorted fragments of myself."¹⁵⁷ Finally, as Baldwin recalled in an interview, he had to leave America:

I no longer felt I knew who I really was, whether I was really black or really white or really female, really talented or a fraud, really strong or merely stubborn. I had become a crazy oddball. I had to get my head together to survive and my only hope of doing that was to leave America.¹⁵⁸

Paris, in contrast to New York, was relatively tolerant, not only towards homosexuality, but also on the subject of race.¹⁵⁹ Importantly, exile also afforded Baldwin the opportunity to reflect on what he

¹⁵⁶ James A. Dievler, "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*," *James Baldwin Now*, 169.

¹⁵⁷ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 685.

¹⁵⁸ Weatherby, 62.

had left behind. As James Campbell notes, it is unlikely that Baldwin would have written "Preservation" if he had remained in America. Less certain still that it would have been published: *Partisan Review*, who were only too happy to publish "Everybody's Protest Novel" would not touch his second essay "with a ten-foot pole."¹⁶⁰

"Preservation," which Baldwin published a year after he left America, is to an extent, an extended reflection on the rigidity of identity categories, with emphasis both on sexual and gender identities. Anticipating his later insistence that *Giovanni's Room* is not a novel about homosexuality, Baldwin argues that subjectivity is too complex to be reduced to one or other identity category:

It is quite impossible to write a worthwhile novel about a Jew or a Gentile or a Homosexual, for people refuse, unhappily, to function in so neat and one-dimensional a fashion. If the novelist considers they are no more complex than their labels he must, of necessity, produce a catalogue, in which we will find, neatly listed, all those attributes with which the label is

¹⁵⁹ See Emmanuel Nelson, "Continents of Desire: James Baldwin and the Pleasures of Homosexual Exile," *James White Review* 13, no. 4 (fall 1996): 8, 16.

¹⁶⁰ Campbell, *Exiled in Paris*, 33.

associated; and this can only operate to reinforce the brutal and dangerous anonymity of our culture ("PI:" 21-2).

Baldwin's rejection of identity categories anticipates his critique of a homogeneous representation of homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room*. As Roderick Ferguson has recently posited, Baldwin's argument is informed by "the avant-garde demand for representational complexity."¹⁶¹ Anticipating his comment to Richard Goldstein, that *Giovanni's Room* is not a novel about homosexuality, Baldwin's argument also foreshadows his dream of a "New Jerusalem," where "[n]o one will have to call themselves gay."¹⁶²

Baldwin reaches his conclusion by critiquing essentialist notions of natural and "unnatural." Whilst both terms are frequently invoked, Baldwin argues rather that we cannot easily discern one from the other:

We spend vast amounts of time and emotional energy in learning how not to be natural and in eluding the trap of our own nature and it therefore becomes

¹⁶¹ Roderick A. Ferguson, "The Parvenu Baldwin and the Other Side of Redemption: Modernity, Race, Sexuality and the Cold War," *James Baldwin Now*, 238. Ferguson insightfully discusses the way in which Baldwin contributed to avant-garde magazines, such as *The Nation*, *New Leader* and *Partisan Review*, arguing for the strong connection between Baldwin and the avant-garde.

¹⁶² Goldstein: 16.

very difficult to know exactly what is meant when we speak of the unnatural ("PI:" 14-15).

As Baldwin wryly notes, to act naturally, would be to copulate in public, to shit on the streets. It is rather that, as Freud forcefully claimed, we use culture to keep nature in check. We cannot therefore, Baldwin argues, invoke the term "natural" to endorse what is ideologically "right" or "good" since we are always striving to keep nature at bay: "[I]t is not possible to have it both ways, to use nature at one time as the final arbiter of human conduct and at another to oppose her angrily as we do" ("PI:" 15).

Baldwin's critique of the terms "natural" and "unnatural" are then employed to reply to the age-old arguments directed against homosexuality:

We arrive at the oldest, the most insistent and the most vehement charge faced by the homosexual: he is unnatural because he has turned from his life-giving function to a union which is sterile ("PI:" 15-16).

Although he later heavily reprimanded Gide in "The Male Prison," Baldwin's argument is strongly reminiscent of the French writer's defence of homosexuality in *Corydon*. Compare, for example,

Baldwin's argument above, with Gide's invocation of Pascal, that "nature is itself merely a first form of custom, just as custom is a second nature."¹⁶³ Arguing that homosexuality's "sterility" has never seriously threatened the world's birth-rate, Baldwin argues that, since homosexuality must be a part of nature, to reject it is to reject nature. "Nor can we continue to shout unnatural," avers Baldwin, "whenever we are confronted by a phenomenon as old as mankind, a phenomenon, moreover, which nature has maliciously repeated in all of her domain" ("PI:" 16).

By locating homosexuality within the realm of nature, both Baldwin and Gide displace the complacency of heterosexuality that claims legitimacy on the basis of being "natural." Gide in particular forcibly makes the point that heterosexuality, far from being "natural," is something that people are conditioned or educated into becoming.¹⁶⁴ However, in contrast to Gide, Baldwin extends his argument to critique the notion of an essence, not only in sexuality, but also in relation to gender:

¹⁶³ André Gide, *Corydon*, trans. and introd. Richard Howard [1923] (Swaffham, England: Gay Men's Press Bibliotek, 1998), 26; see also Gide's citation of Goethe, that "[p]ederasty is as old as humanity itself, and one can therefore say that it is natural, that it resides in nature, even if it proceeds against nature" (91).

¹⁶⁴ Gide, *Corydon*, 90.

Let me suggest that [the homosexual's] present debasement and our obsession with him corresponds to the debasement of the relationship between the sexes; and that his ambiguous and terrible position in our society reflects the ambiguities and terrors which time has deposited on that relationship as the sea piles seaweed and wreckage along the shore ("PI:" 16).

By linking the stigma of homosexuality to the relationship between men and women, Baldwin suggests that the fear of same-sex desire comes directly from the misunderstandings between the sexes. Although Baldwin was an avowed sceptic of all schools of psychoanalysis, his insistence that heterosexuality is implicated in homosexuality--"[t]he problem of the homosexual . . . has its roots in the nature of man and woman and their relationship to one another"-- ("PI:" 14)), recalls Freud's pioneering observation in 1915 that, "from the point of view of psychoanalysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating and is not a self-evident fact based upon an attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature."¹⁶⁵ For Baldwin, the

¹⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," [1915] *PFL*, vol. 7, *On Sexuality*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Press, 1986), n. 1, 57.

"problem" that Freud alludes to (in Baldwin's term the "hysteria" that greets the homosexual), "corresponds to the debasement of the relationship between the sexes" ("PI:" 16).¹⁶⁶

Baldwin's criticism of the relationship between men and women in popular culture follows two--but interconnected--arguments. First, Baldwin argues that our notions of what are "masculine" and "feminine," far from being rigid, are in fact not only constructed but are constantly in flux; and second, that the American insistence on innocence has resulted in an infantile development of masculinity.

According to Baldwin, "[m]en and women seem to function as imperfect and sometimes unwilling mirrors for one another. . . . A division between them can only betray a division within the soul of each" ("PI:" 17). Whilst the division that Baldwin alludes to suggests a criticism of heterosexuality, it soon becomes clear that he is critical of the popular images of gender that bear little relation to reality. Whilst I agree with William Cohen that, for Baldwin, "'gay' and 'straight' barely constitute identities," it is less clear that gender in Baldwin's writing "is

¹⁶⁶ Baldwin's essay anticipates Sedgwick's theory of "homosexual panic." See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (New York, London, etc., Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 19.

a rigidly fixed, virtually incontestable axis of difference."¹⁶⁷ In fact, Baldwin readily attacks the notion that there is an essence either in sexuality, or in gender:

Matters are not helped if we thereupon decide that men must recapture their status as men and that women must embrace their function as women; not only does the resulting *rigidity* of attitude put to death any possible communion, but, having once listed the bald physical facts, no one is prepared to go further and decide, of our multiple human attributes, which are masculine and which are feminine ("PI:" 17; emphasis mine).

Baldwin's critique suggests that not only is gender socially constructed, but that the boundaries, like those of "natural" and "unnatural" are always fluid. Echoing his criticism that Jewish or homosexual literature fails to explore the complexity of subjectivity, Baldwin argues that gender differences evince a "merciless paradox in the nature of the sexes," a point that he illustrates by countering gender stereotypes ("PI:" 18). Whilst popular images

¹⁶⁷ Cited by Geraldine Murphy, "Subversive Anti-Stalinism: Race and Sexuality in the Early Essays of James Baldwin," *ELH* 63 (1996): 1040.

of women "say that women have finer and more delicate sensibilities," Baldwin reminds the reader that there are exceptions for every attempt to categorise femininity ("PI:" 17-18).

Baldwin's central premise is that Americans fail to show any "recognition of this complexity" ("PI:" 18). By refusing to examine the heterogeneity of identity, Baldwin argues that American masculinity is caught in an arrested development:¹⁶⁸

In the truly awesome attempt of the American to at once preserve his innocence and arrive at man's estate, that mindless monster, the tough guy, has been created and perfected: whose masculinity is found in the most infantile and elementary externals and whose attitudes towards women is the wedding of the most abysmal romanticism and the most implacable distrust ("PI:" 18-19).

Baldwin's argument foreshadows his later lament in "Here Be Dragons" that "[t]he American ideal of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American idea of masculinity," an ideal that he criticises for its creation of simplified binaries, such as "cowboys and

¹⁶⁸ To a certain extent, as I examine in my next ch., Baldwin is signifying on the post-war notion that homosexuality was the result of arrested development.

Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white." Echoing his critique of masculinity in "Preservation," Baldwin bemoans that masculinity is "so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden--as an unpatriotic act--that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood."¹⁶⁹

In "Preservation," Baldwin anchors his argument by railing against the fiction of James Cain and Raymond Chandler. According to Baldwin, these authors perpetuate the myth that the woman is "the unknown quantity" in contrast to the "inexplicably" "innocent" man ("PI:" 19). The result, as Baldwin warns, is that "[m]en and women have all but disappeared from our popular culture," leaving us with an unbelievable but "disturbing series of effigies" ("PI:" 19). The danger, Baldwin concludes, is that we can never believe that these "effigies" can feel love or understanding for one another: "the boy cannot know a woman since he has never become a man" ("PI:" 20).

Instead of love, Baldwin concurs, we are privy--not even to passion--but "an unbelievably barren and wrathful grinding" ("PI:" 19). Characters in popular

¹⁶⁹ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 678. In the Goldstein interview, Baldwin repeatedly suggests that the root of American homophobia is caused by this "infantile culture" (13).

fiction, Baldwin avers, do not display passion or communion with the opposite sex. Instead, "[t]hey are surrounded by blood and treachery; and their bitter coupling, which has the urgency of machine-gun fire, is heralded and punctuated by the mysterious and astounded corpse" ("PI:" 19). It is a theme that Baldwin would later describe in "The Male Prison," where he writes that "communion between the sexes has become sorely threatened," with the proliferation of glamorous and violent Hollywood images ("MP," 135).

The violent psychosexual images that Baldwin offers illustrate the gratuitous violence that he deplores in fiction. Baldwin's criticism of violence in literature is a theme that he would return to repeatedly, most famously in his critique of protest literature. The failure of novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Baldwin would later write, is not just that they are violent, but that the psychological complexities, the important reasons *why* people act in this way are not addressed. Richard Wright's work, Baldwin avers, is "gratuitous and compulsive because the root of the violence is never examined." There is, Baldwin states, "a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence."¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," *Nobody Knows*, 154.

Significantly, in view of his subsequent publication of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin also criticises homosexual novels such as *The City and the Pillar*, *The Folded Leaf* and *The Fall of Valor* for their violence, comparing them to novels by Cain, Chandler, Laura Z. Hobson and Mary Jane Ward. Such novels, Baldwin writes, "are not concerned with homosexuality but the ever-present danger of sexual activity between men" ("PI:" 21). Baldwin's main criticism of homosexual novels is their inability to "interpret any of the reality or complexity of human experience," a criticism that is remarkably similar to Anthony West's comment that *Giovanni's Room* "completely lacks the validity of actual experience" ("PI:" 21).¹⁷¹ West's review suggests that homosexual novels can never deal with the range of human experience; in their inaccessibility to the general reader, they cannot address, as Robert Duncan also bemoaned, the "universal human experience."¹⁷² And this is what Baldwin seems also to be saying, but with an important difference. It is not homosexuality *per se* that Baldwin is attacking, but anything that reduces people to a label:

¹⁷¹ Anthony West "Review of *Giovanni's Room*," *New Yorker* 32 (November 1956): 221.

A novel insistently demands the presence and passion of human beings, who cannot ever be labeled. . . . Without this passion we may all smother to death, locked in those airless, labeled cells, which isolate us from each other and separate us from ourselves ("PI:" 22).

And, it is the "airless labeled cells" that I want to conclude with by showing how Baldwin's criticism of Gide in "The Male Prison," further illustrates his views on sexuality.

4. Unlocking the Male Prison: Baldwin's Essay on Gide, and Himself

To conclude this chapter I examine Baldwin's essay on Gide, "The Male Prison" (1954), which I argue functions as a microcosm of many of his most surprising and perplexing comments on homosexuality. Although "Prison" was published only five years after "Preservation," there is a clear shift in register. By 1954, Baldwin had established himself as both a novelist and an accomplished essayist, and had begun to define his public writing voice. Just as Baldwin at times spoke in the voice of "representative race man,"

¹⁷² Robert Duncan, "The Homosexual in Society," *Politics* (August 1944): 210.

in "The Male Prison," as Jerome de Manet has noted, Baldwin speaks "from the perspective of an all-encompassing voice, one that speaks from the heterosexual majority," so that it becomes difficult to identify what Melvin Dixon calls his "ploy:" his strategy "to capture the attention of his readers and lead them to an affirmation, however tentative, of the humanity inherent in his depiction of homosexuality."¹⁷³

Despite Cleaver's curious claim that Baldwin "venerate[d]" the French writer, the latter displays an unequivocal dislike, both of Gide's European high Protestantism and his sexuality (*SOI*, 105). Surveying the French writer's fiction, Baldwin notes that he found Gide's work "simply cold, solemn and irritatingly pious," whilst his "precise memoirs," evinced "the most exasperating egocentricity" ("MP," 130). In contrast to the French writer's earlier writing, Baldwin acknowledges that Gide's confessional account of his marriage, *Madeleine*, displays not only pain, but also "devotion to a high ideal." But no sooner has Baldwin's criticism of Gide faltered, then he launches into a relentless and forceful tirade:

¹⁷³ de Romanet: 7; Melvin Dixon, "This Light, This Fire, This Time," *Out/Look* 2, no. 2 (fall 1989): 39.

It seems to me now that the two things which contribute most heavily to my dislike of Gide--or rather, to the discomfort he caused me to feel--were his Protestantism and his homosexuality. It was clear to me that he had not got over his Protestantism and that he had not come to terms with his nature.¹⁷⁴

For a writer who, only two years later would publish *Giovanni's Room*, and, less than fifteen years later confessed, "I know now I am a Puritan," Baldwin's statement is little less than remarkable.¹⁷⁵

Baldwin's curious dismissal of Gide is in part illuminated by his later confession that his attack stemmed from anxieties that he was attempting to deal with himself:

That was meant . . . as a commentary on myself. I was accusing myself, perhaps not directly enough, of a certain fear and a certain hypocrisy. . . . it wasn't meant as a judgement on *Gide*. It was meant as a judgement on me.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ James Baldwin, "The Male Prison," *Nobody Knows*, 130.

¹⁷⁵ Eckman, 122.

¹⁷⁶ Eckman, 137. Eckman nicely captures Baldwin's essay style: "Baldwin's early essays are rather like a running autobiography--communiqué from the front reporting the various advances in his own development as a human being, a Negro and an American. . . . He gave the impression of wanting to set the record straight for himself, and only after that for his readers" (136-7).

Baldwin's disingenuous disclaimer suggests that his criticism of Gide can be read as a veiled confession over his own anxieties about religion and sexuality, a point that I examine before exploring how the American author suggests a way of breaking free from the male prison.

Baldwin begins by noting that his dislike of Gide's work stemmed from the French writer's public discussion of homosexuality. Departing from *Madeleine*, Baldwin clearly draws on Gide's defence of homosexuality in *Corydon*:

And his homosexuality, I felt, was his own affair which he ought to have kept hidden from us, or, if he needed to be so explicit, he ought at least to have managed to be a little more scientific . . . less illogical, less romantic. He ought to have leaned less heavily on the examples of the dead, great men, of vanished cultures. . . . If he were going to talk about homosexuality at all, he ought, in a word, to have sounded a little less disturbed ("MP," 131).

Baldwin's paean to privacy anticipates his later insistence that one's sexuality is a private matter. And yet by stating that one's sexual preference is a matter between oneself and God, Baldwin invokes the

very Protestantism that he criticises in Gide. Furthermore, it is clearly Baldwin who is disturbed: it is Baldwin who writes of the "discomfort" that Gide caused him to feel. Why Gide ought to have kept his homosexuality hidden from readers is not quite clear; nor is it clear whether Baldwin is referring to Gide's novels, his journals, or his memoir.

Whilst Baldwin criticises Gide for being "illogical," it is the former's argument that becomes increasingly confused. By accusing him of leaning too heavily on "examples of the dead, great men, of vanished cultures," Baldwin tacitly admonishes Gide's historical correlation between homosexuality and artistic brilliance in *Corydon*.¹⁷⁷ Still more surprising is that Baldwin chastises Gide for not being more scientific, given that *Corydon* displays an extremely well researched knowledge of medical history and theory.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, shortly after accusing Gide of lacking scientific precision, Baldwin then goes on to argue that no amount of scientific or physiological

¹⁷⁷ See, for example, *Corydon*, esp. the Fourth Dialogue: "only the periods or regions without uranism are also the periods without art" (117).

¹⁷⁸ See Patrick Pollard, *André Gide: Homosexual Moralist* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991), where he notes that Gide began collecting works of medico-legal interest as early as 1890 (31); see also his useful account of Gide's use of medico-legal theorists (88-109).

proof will alter people's views on homosexuality ("MP," 131).

Baldwin's contradictory complaints levelled at Gide find coherence in his account of *Madeleine*. In particular, Baldwin objects to the ways in which Gide separated his spiritual and carnal devotion to his wife. By claiming in *Madeleine*, that his "ethereal love was more worthy of her," and elsewhere that "the spiritual force of my love inhibited all carnal desire," Baldwin argues that Gide prevented his wife from attaining her "womanhood and its right to flower" ("MP," 132).¹⁷⁹

One way of usefully reading Baldwin and Gide's explications of desire is the ways in which religion informs both writers. Although both writers share marginalised Protestant backgrounds, Baldwin's Pentecostal upbringing, as I illustrate in my final chapter, clearly informs the way that he writes. As Jerome de Romanet has pointed out, in contrast to Gide's polarity of spirit or flesh, Baldwin writes from a black Pentecostalism that believes in "a necessary continuum of body and soul between this world and the next," a point I examine in more detail

¹⁷⁹ André Gide, *Madeleine (et nunc manet in te)*, trans. and introd. Justin O'Brien [1952] (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1989), 16, 20.

in my final chapter.¹⁸⁰ In contrast to such a smooth continuity, Gide's work is replete with the disjunction between body and soul.¹⁸¹ And it is this separation--the carnal from the spiritual--that Baldwin criticises, not only in Gide's work, but in American society. For Baldwin, the root of sexual intolerance is "[t]error of the flesh . . . we're supposed to mortify the flesh, a doctrine which has led to untold horrors. This is a very biblical culture; people believe the wages of sin is death."¹⁸²

In "The Male Prison," Baldwin suggests that Gide, by remaining married to his wife and yet seeking numerous encounters with "the boys on the *Piazza di Spagna*," is corrupted by a guilt that leads him to despise his young lovers ("MP," 133). Unable or unwilling to love either his wife or sexual partners, Gide, Baldwin maintains, became isolated from any possibility of "human involvement:"

The really horrible thing about the
phenomenon of present-day homosexuality,

¹⁸⁰ de Romanet: 10.

¹⁸¹ See for example Gide's *The Immoralist*, trans. Dorothy Bussy [1902] (London: Penguin, 1960), where Michel begins ch. 3 by stating: "I am going to speak at length of my body. I shall speak of it so much you will think at first I have forgotten my soul" (33); compare this to Arthur Montana in *Just Above My Head* who Baldwin describes (in his relationship with Crunch) as "neither guilty nor ashamed. He had felt a purity, a shining joy as though he had been, astoundingly, miraculously blessed . . . He had not doubted for a moment that all love was holy" (471).

¹⁸² Goldstein: 13.

the horrible thing which lies like a worm at the heart of Gide's trouble and work and the reason that he so clung to Madeleine, is that today's unlucky deviate can only save himself by the most tremendous exertion of all his forces from falling into an underworld in which he never meets either men or women, where it is impossible to have either a lover or a friend, where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased ("MP," 134).

The negative language that Baldwin uses to describe homosexuality ("horrible," "worm"), anticipates his damning portrayal of the homosexual milieu in *Giovanni's Room*.¹⁸³ On the one hand, he shared with Gide an unfettered disgust of certain types of homosexuality: in *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin is careful to distinguish Arthur from other homosexuals, adding that he was "nobody's faggot," just as Eric, the hero of *Another Country* distances himself both from the "raucous cries" of the "birds of paradise," and the "cemetery" of a gay bar.¹⁸⁴ And yet the vehemence of Baldwin's depiction of homosexual

¹⁸³ There are also parallels with Robert Duncan's depiction of post-war gay subculture as a place which "did not allow for any feeling at all other than this self-ridicule . . . leaving a wake of disillusionment, a belief that extended to oneself, to life itself" (210-11).

¹⁸⁴ Baldwin, *Just Above My Head*, 31; *Another Country*, 259, 327.

subculture further complicates his views on dissident sexuality.

Baldwin's critique of the "male prison" is illustrative of the ways in which he railed against the rigidity of narrow categories. In my final chapter I discuss the ways in which Baldwin carefully distinguished between "genuine human involvement" and "meaningless round[s] of conquests" ("MP," 134). But I want to conclude by raising the question of whether bisexuality most closely approximates Baldwin's vision of sexual love.¹⁸⁵ In particular, I want to ask whether bisexuality is Baldwin's key to the male prison, a condition that he refers to both in "Preservation," and his essay on Gide. Given that so much of Baldwin's fiction is about the struggles to make connections--whether between black and white, gay and straight, men and women," does bisexuality, by communing with men and women, offer the greatest chance for hope?

In "The Male Prison," Baldwin makes a veiled, but unclear appeal to an ideal of bisexuality. "Men," Baldwin concludes, "cannot live without women and women cannot live without men. . . . This door [communion with the sexes] . . . must be kept open,

¹⁸⁵ See Eckman where JB notes that he was nearly married three times, adding that his early years were struggles in coming to terms with what he would later call his bisexuality (112).

and none feel this more keenly than those on whom the door is perpetually threatening or has seemed to close" ("MP," 135). Baldwin both condemns Gide's sacrifice of Madeleine--by forcing her to chastity--but also seems to suggest that the French writer *must* keep the door open to a heterosexual relationship. Foregrounding Leo in *Tell Me*, who, as I have shown, explains the need for male companionship, "in order to be able to love women," Baldwin suggests that the doors should never be closed.

In contrast to homosexuality or heterosexuality, bisexuality arguably offers Baldwin a way out of the rigidly defining sexual identities that he so disdained, a point I discuss in Chapter Three. But it was Baldwin's final essay in *The Price of the Ticket*, "Here Be Dragons," that he came closest to advocating what would generally be construed as bisexuality in his non-fiction. Characteristically Baldwin avoids using the term "bisexual," but uses the term "androgynous," an adjective that Baldwin had tentatively used earlier in *Another Country* to describe Eric.¹⁸⁶ Baldwin ends "Dragons" with an image

¹⁸⁶ Baldwin, *Another Country*, 324. This is a point that I discuss in ch. 3. For a useful discussion of the term "androgynous" in relation to Baldwin, see Kendall Thomas "'Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing:' Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality and the Jargon of Authenticity," *Representing Black Men*, ed. Marcellus Blount and George Cunningham (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 56-61.

of wholeness and neatness: of inter-related, inter-connected sexual, racial and gender axes:

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other--male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other.¹⁸⁷

Baldwin's conclusion to *The Price of the Ticket* seems to suggest that categories and labels must be transcended, since we are all a part of one another. And yet, if Baldwin's point is that there is no such thing as an essential homosexual, heterosexual, masculine or feminine identity, then the rhetorical neatness of the ending of "Dragons," too clinically ties up the remorse and agony that his writing elsewhere points to. As I argue in the following chapter, Baldwin is only too aware of both the need for and the absurdity of identity categories. Rather than concluding that Baldwin suggests a "post-categorical" ideal, I will be arguing that there is cohesion in his writing, something that holds and binds his writing together. Perhaps then we should not

¹⁸⁷ Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 690.

ask what happens when we go looking for Jimmy, but
what might happen when we search for "all the Jimmy
Baldwins."

CHAPTER TWO

**Can You Really Tell? Whiteness,
Boundaries and Miscegenation in
*Giovanni's Room***

If I's imitation, what is you? Bofe of
us is imitation white--dat's what we is--
-en pow'ful good imitation too-yah-yah-
yah!--we don't' 'mount to noth'n' as
imitation *niggers*

Mark Twain, *Puddn'head Wilson*

Some day, Dr. Lancaster was saying,
perhaps a Negro writer will write a
novel about white people.

Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*

Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), set against the backdrop of a Pentecostal church in Harlem, is a sensitive articulation of many of the most persistent themes in black American culture.¹ Although Baldwin stated in an interview that

¹ See Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinammon, "Introduction," *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), where the authors note that Christianity was

Go Tell it was "a fairly deliberate attempt to break out of" what he had always thought of as the "cage of Negro writing," the traditional setting of the church, and the absence of white characters ensured that reviewers focussed on the novel's depictions of black culture.² Whilst Baldwin insisted that he had attempted to create characters that were "people first, Negroes almost incidentally," *Time's* reviewer, for example, dismissed the author's claims: "[p]eople they certainly are, but so movingly and intensely Negro that any reader listening to them with the compassion Baldwin invokes will overlook his cliché."³

In contrast to his "intensely Negro" first novel, Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956) struck many readers as an anomaly. Not only is the novel set in Paris portraying a homosexual relationship, but, as Baldwin wrote to his editor in 1954, his latest book "does not have a Negro theme, it does not even have a Negro character."⁴ Critics who had admired Baldwin's portrayal of black culture in *Go Tell* it were unsettled by Baldwin's latest novel, illustrated by

the most prevalent theme in African-American writing up until the second half of this century (2).

² T.E. Cassidy, "The Long Struggle," *Commonweal* 58 (22 May 1953): 186.

³ Cassidy: 186; cited by Trudier Harris, ed., *New Essays on Go Tell it on the Mountain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

Nathan Scott's comment that whilst *Go Tell it* "is a passionate gesture of identification" with African-American life and culture, *Giovanni's Room*, "is a book that strikes us as a deflection, as a kind of detour."⁵

The geographical setting, the theme of homosexuality and the absence of black characters have ensured that whilst *Go Tell it* remains Baldwin's most widely read and enduring book, *Giovanni's Room* has remained on the peripheries of African-American literature. "Of all Baldwin's novels," Stephen Adams has noted, "least attention is paid to *Giovanni's Room*." More often than not, Adams continues, Baldwin's second novel is frequently dismissed as "thinly disguised autobiography."⁶ For many readers and critics, *Giovanni's Room*, as Claude Summers has posited, "is frequently seen as anomalous in the writer's canon, largely because its central characters are white," a point echoed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who notes that the novel "is seldom taught in black

⁴ Letter from James Baldwin to Helen Strauss, copied to Philip Rahv (26 February 1954).

⁵ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Judgement Marked By a Cellar: The American Negro Writer and the Dialectic of Despair," *Denver Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (summer 1967): 27-8.

⁶ Stephen Adams, "Giovanni's Room: The Homosexual as Hero," *James Baldwin: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 133.

literature classes because its characters are white and gay."⁷

Although, as I examined in my previous chapter, *Giovanni's Room* has emerged as "[a] central text in the American literature of homosexuality," its canonical status as a work of gay fiction contrasts with its dubious place in the African-American canon.⁸ This chapter seeks to explore the ways in which *Giovanni's Room* represents what Marjory Garber terms "a category crisis," by examining the reasons why *Giovanni's Room* has troubled both black and white critics alike.⁹ The first two parts will argue that *Giovanni's Room* reflects and explores the very issues of authenticity and authority that have hounded the novel from its inception. Whilst I bear in mind Baldwin's recollection that "to have a black presence in the book at that moment . . . would have been quite beyond my powers," I urge the importance of relocating Baldwin's second novel in the cultural and political climate of the 1950s--a period that saw an increasing

⁷ Claude J. Summers, "Looking at the Naked Sun: James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*," *Gay Fictions: From Wilde to Stonewall* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 172; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of Little Tree," *New York Times Book Review* (24 November 1991): 28.

⁸ Triangle Publishing group did a poll on the top one hundred gay books, where *Giovanni's Room* was listed as number two; see Fiachra Gibbons, "Gay Literature List Shuns Humour For Anguish," *Guardian* (Friday 11 June 1999): 9.

anxiety over the policing of both racial and of sexual boundaries.¹⁰ In the first section, I argue that *Giovanni's Room*--published only two years after the desegregation of schools--feeds into acute anxieties about the permeability of racial borders. In the second section, I argue that Baldwin's decision to portray a homosexual protagonist who is able to "pass" as straight also feeds into and responds to prevailing Cold War concerns that increasingly viewed homosexuality as a national security risk. The third section explores questions of authority and authenticity that *Giovanni's Room* raises by asking how we might define African-American literature. Finally, the fourth section offers a close reading of *Giovanni's Room* in order to show how Baldwin disrupts and disturbs the rigidity of racial and sexual boundaries.

1. Relocating *Giovanni's Room*: "Race"

Baldwin's writing in the 1950s is punctuated by a determination to emerge, not only as a Negro writer,

⁹ Cited by Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 182.

¹⁰ John Elgrably and George Fiction, "The Art of Fiction: James Baldwin," [1984] *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L.

but as an American writer. After the success of *Go Tell it*, Baldwin describes being "corralled into another trap: now I was expected to write diminishing versions of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* forever."¹¹

Frustrated with the assumption that he must write about African-American topics, Baldwin noted how he had written about "being a Negro at such length," not because he believed it was his only subject matter, but because "it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else."¹²

Foregrounding Salman Rushdie's warning of the "bogey of authenticity," Baldwin notes wryly that he had written "about the Negro problem, concerning which the colour of my skin made me automatically an expert."¹³ By the mid 1950s Baldwin wearily noted that "the Negro problem is written about so widely. The bookshelves groan under the weight of information, and everyone, therefore considers himself informed."¹⁴

In 1948, Baldwin left Greenwich Village for Paris, as he recollected, "to prevent myself from

Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson & London: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 239.

¹¹ James Baldwin, "Notes for *The Amen Corner*," *The Amen Corner* [1968] (London: Penguin, 1991), 12.

¹² James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes of a Native Son* [1955] (London: Penguin, 1995), 15; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Notes*.

¹³ Salman Rushdie, "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist," *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991), 67.

¹⁴ James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes*, 13.

becoming merely a Negro; or even, merely a Negro writer."¹⁵ Baldwin would write about expatriatism as a kind of levelling: he found that in Paris, to his "astonishment" that he was "as American as any Texan G.I.," and that fellow Americans--whether white or black--had a shared experience, because "they were no more at home in Europe than I was."¹⁶ The path to Paris had been worn, not only by African-American artists such as Countee Cullen, Richard Wright and Chester Himes, but by celebrated white American authors such as Henry James, Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway. In fact Baldwin claimed that James's novels, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Princess Casamassima* were two of the ten novels that helped him "break out of the ghetto."¹⁷

As John Shawcross has pointed out,

¹⁵ James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American," *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* [1959] (London: Penguin, 1991), 17; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Nobody Knows*.

¹⁶ Baldwin, "The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American," *Nobody Knows*, 17-18.

¹⁷ Horace Porter, *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 126. For two insightful pieces on Baldwin and Henry James, see Porter's ch., "James Baldwin and the 'Mighty' Henry James" (123-155) and Charles Newman, "The Lesson of the Master: Henry James and James Baldwin," *James Baldwin: Modern Critical Views* (45-57). In an (unpublished) letter from Helen Strauss to Philip Rahv (26 February 1954), Baldwin discusses *GR*, writing that "there is something in it of James's *The Ambassadors*." He also mentions parallels with Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and James's *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Baldwin must have been greatly angered . . . at being labelled a Negro novelist, not a novelist. . . . Such a label implies that the writer can write only of a Negro world, from a Negro point of view, in a Negro idiom.¹⁸

Although Shawcross is right to point out Baldwin's frustration at being pigeon-holed, he stops short of locating his views in the turbulent political and aesthetic shifts of the mid 1950s. Baldwin's literary debt to white authors such as Hemingway and Henry James, and his desire to become a writer--not just a black American writer--come out of a notable shift in the African-American literary scene of the mid 1950s.

As early as 1941, Arthur Davis, Sterling Brown and Ulysses Lee had forcefully urged African-American authors to reject a specifically black aesthetic. In their introduction to their co-edited anthology, *The Negro Caravan*, Davis, Brown and Lee mapped out their views in an introduction that is worth citing at length:

The editors . . . do not believe that the expression "Negro literature" is an accurate one, and they have avoided using it. "Negro literature" has no

¹⁸ John T. Shawcross, "Joy and Sadness: James Baldwin, Novelist," *Callaloo* 6 (spring/summer 1983): 102.

applications if it means structural peculiarity, or a Negro school of writing. . . . The editors consider Negro writers to be American writers, and literature by American Negroes to be a segment of American literature. . . . The chief cause for objection to the term is that "Negro literature" is too easily placed by certain critics, white and Negro, in an alcove apart.¹⁹

The views set out by Davis, Lee and Brown bear remarkable similarities to Baldwin's early repudiation of the term "Negro writer." Central to the editors' introduction is the imperative that African-American writers must dilute and even write out any traces of black culture and language, what they term the "structural peculiarity" of black American writing.

Although Davis & co. sowed the early seeds of what would later be termed "Integrationist Poetics," their ideas would not become mainstream until the mid 1950s.²⁰ In an essay titled "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," Richard Wright predicted that, as "the Negro merges into the main stream of

¹⁹ Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, ed., *The Negro Caravan: Writings By American Negroes*, introd. Julius Lester [1941] (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1970), 7.

²⁰ For a useful overview of this movement, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Discovering America: Generational Shifts, Afro-American Literary Criticism, and the Study of Expressive Culture," *Blues*,

American life, there might result actually a disappearance of Negro literature as such."²¹ As America achieved more social equality, Wright believed that African-American literature would become less "racial," resulting in "a merging of Negro expression with American expression."²²

Wright's views are echoed in an important essay by Arthur Davis, titled "Integration and Race Literature," published the same year as *Giovanni's Room*. Like Wright, Davis maintained that the course of African-American literature had been governed by political and social changes, such as the Abolition Movement, Reconstruction and World War I.²³ With the desegregation of schools in 1954 (the *Brown V. Topeka Board of Education*), Davis predicted that "the Negro will move permanently into full participation in American life--social, economic, political and literary."²⁴

Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 64-112.

²¹ Richard Wright, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," *White Man, Listen!* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1957), 148.

²² Wright, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," *White Man, Listen!*, 149.

²³ For a useful historical account of desegregation, see John Hope Franklin, "A Brief History," *The Black American Reference Book*, ed. Mabel M. Smythe (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), 1-90, esp. 69-71.

²⁴ Arthur P. Davis, "Integration and Race Literature," *The American Writer and His Roots: Selected Papers from the First Conference of Negro Writers, March 1959* (New York: American Society of African Culture, 1960), 40.

The movement towards an Integrationist Poetics that I have briefly outlined is crucial when considering Baldwin's reasons for his white and blonde narrator. In a letter written to his editor in 1953, Baldwin makes it clear that he needed to use the most ordinary American that he could create:

What is really delicate about it is that, since I want to convey something about the kind and intensity--with its various effects--of American loneliness and insecurity . . . I must use the most ordinary type of American I can find-- the good white Protestant is the image I want to use. This is precisely the kind of American about whose setting I know the least . . . Whether this will be enough to create a real human being only time will tell.²⁵

Baldwin's need to use "the most ordinary type of American" to convey an American (universal) loneliness and insecurity is strongly reminiscent of Wright and Davis's belief that African-American expression would soon merge with dominant (white) America to forge a homogeneous experience. Not surprisingly, Baldwin's only other story without a black character was also

²⁵ From James Baldwin to Bill Cole (13 January, 1954), University of Indiana.

written during the height of the Integrationist Poetics."²⁶

Importantly, Baldwin does not write of wanting to convey *white* America's loneliness and alienation, but an *American* loneliness that requires the vehicle of his white protagonist.²⁷ By not invoking the specificity of a black alienation, Baldwin implicitly suggests that David, his narrator, will convey a universal--that is black and white--suffering, as his epigraph from Walt Whitman suggests: "I am *the man*; I suffered, I was there" (emphasis mine).²⁸

Baldwin's concerns about employing a white protagonist ("delicate," "time will only tell") are indicative of contemporary resistance to the growing move towards assimilation. "Integration," wrote Arthur Davis in 1956, is "the most vital issue in America today," with the African-American at "the center of

²⁶ See James Baldwin, "The Man Child," *Going to Meet the Man* [1965] (London: Penguin, 1991), 55-77; also David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), who notes that, whilst the story was not published until 1965, Baldwin had written a much earlier draft (248).

²⁷ See Houston Baker, Jr., "Discovering America," where he makes the distinction between American and AMERICA, the latter signifying a harmonious unity between black and white culture (esp. 66-70).

²⁸ The title story of Baldwin's collection of short stories, *Going to Meet the Man* has a white narrator. By 1965 "the man" had become a negative synonym of "the white man." In contrast, Baldwin's earlier use of the term in 1956 denotes universal suffering, illustrating his growing disillusionment with white America.

this violent controversy."²⁹ The controversy that Davis alludes to is illustrated both by white and black American anxieties, both about the dissipation and of the merging of black and white culture. According to Arnold Rampersad, Langston Hughes "linked what he saw as Baldwin's excesses to the trend of integration sapping the strength of black youth." In a letter to Arna Bontemps, Hughes warned that "Integration is going to RUIN Negro business--as it is apparently threatening to ruin the finest young writer of fiction [Baldwin] in the race."³⁰ Like Hughes, Addison Gayle in a discussion of Baldwin's essay "Stranger in the Village," complained of the "tone of assimilation, the obsession with fusing the black and white cultures," accusing Baldwin of "obliterating racial characteristics altogether."³¹

But whilst Hughes and Gayle expressed their concerns that African-American literature and culture would become dissipated, *Giovanni's Room* was also published at a time when there were growing concerns about the threat of "racial pollution," precipitated by fears that the desegregation of both the army and

²⁹ Arthur P. Davis, "Integration and Race Literature," 34.

³⁰ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 335.

³¹ Addison Gayle, Jr., "The Function of Black Literature at the Present Time," ed. Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 389, 390.

schools would miscegenate American culture. Whilst Cold War critics have usually attributed the pervasive fear of what Andrew Ross terms "germophobia," to the threat of communism and homosexuality (which I examine below), there were increasing concerns, as James F. Davis has noted, "perhaps paranoid is not too strong a term--about the specter of 'invisible blackness.'" ³²

James F. Davis has noted the ways in which "[m]uch of the rhetoric advanced . . . against desegregating schools featured the assertion that racial integration would destroy the purity of the races."³³ In March 1956, the year that *Giovanni's Room* was published, ninety-six Southern Congressmen (every congressman from the Old Confederacy's eleven states and every Southern senator except three) pledged to overturn the recently desegregated education system, protesting in an open letter to the *New York Times*.³⁴ Thomas Brady, a well-known Southern Judge, warned that the desegregation of schools would lead to "the tragedy of miscegenation."³⁵ Like William Faulkner, who famously predicted that "the Negro race will vanish by

³² Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 45; James F. Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 56.

³³ James F. Davis, 17.

³⁴ Cited by Anthony Cooper, ed. *The Black Experience, 1865-1978* (Dartford: Greenwich University Press, 1995), 240.

³⁵ James F. Davis, 17.

intermarriage," adding that "if it came to fighting, I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the streets and shooting Negroes," Brady pledged to die for the principles of racial purity.³⁶

Although Brady and Faulkner's views on integration were clearly extreme, it is important to realise that they were by no means isolated. Kenneth O'Reilly's revealing article on Eisenhower shows that whilst the president publicly extolled desegregation, he privately condemned the decision as "morally repugnant."³⁷ The point I want to stress is that even the most liberal whites could only support the desegregation of the education system under very specific terms and conditions. As Leerom Medovoi has recently outlined:

By and large, even the most liberal white opinion could only affirm racial integration by imagining interracial schooling taking place through the piecemeal admission and assimilation of non-whites who could then be brought to cross-identify racially with the

³⁶ Cited by James Campbell, *Exiled in Paris: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Samuel Beckett, and Others on the Left Bank* (New York & London, etc.: Scribner, 1995), 208.

³⁷ Kenneth O'Reilly, "Racial Integration: The Battle General Eisenhower Chose Not to Fight," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 0, no. 18 (winter 1997-8): 112.

primarily white and white-staffed schools. To conceive of "minority majority" or nonassimilationist integrated education, seemed tantamount to accepting the collapse of the racial order.³⁸

Medovoi points to the ways in which desegregation fuelled concerns with the perimeters of racial boundaries. Implicit in what Medovoi claims was a pervasive anxiety, is the concern that whiteness would be indistinguishable from blackness, rendering permeable racial boundaries that hitherto had been sharply delineated by the "racial order."

To conclude this section, I turn to Robert Bone's book, *The Negro Novel in America*, first published in 1958. Bone's study is important, not least because it was one of the first attempts at a comprehensive survey of black literature by a white critic. Historically, *The Negro Novel in America* is also important as it suggests ways in which *Giovanni's Room* (and other "raceless" novels) fed into concerns about integration and assimilation.

Whereas Bone lauds Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell* it for capturing "the essence of Negro experience in

³⁸ Leerom Medovoi, "Reading the Blackboard: Youth, Masculinity, and Racial Cross-Identification," *Race and the Subject of*

America," he lambastes *Giovanni's Room*, criticising the novel's sketchiness, describing it as though it were a dismembered and deteriorating body: "The characters," writes Bone, "are vague and disembodied, the themes half-digested, the colors bleached rather than vivified. We recognize in this sterile landscape the unprocessed raw materials of art."³⁹ Although Bone's language--such as the word "sterile"--suggests a not fully articulated homophobic response, his comment that the characters are bleached rather than vivified holds the key to Bone's unease. It is rather that, for Bone, the characters are really African-American, made white for the purpose of Baldwin's novel, compounded by his view that Baldwin "simply transposes the moral topography of Harlem to the streets of Paris" (*NNA*, 226).

Bone's distrust of *Giovanni's Room* is qualified by his subsequent legislation on the boundaries of African-American literature. "For good and sufficient artistic reasons," writes Bone, "the Negro novel must approximate the Negro's present experience" (*NNA*, 253). Bone's authority to arbitrate on the black experience is problematic in itself. But I am

Masculinities, ed. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), 145.

interested here in how Bone justifies what he calls "good and sufficient artistic reasons," and in particular, how his views reflect contemporary concerns about integration and assimilation.

Bone becomes increasingly more precise in his advice as he inhabits the role of literary immigration officer, policing the boundaries of national and ethnic experience:

In choosing an appropriate vehicle for his theme, the author's first consideration must be familiarity with surface detail. . . . Every artist apprehends reality through a specific culture. Why should the Negro novelist imagine that he alone is exempt from the limitations of time and place? (*NNA*, 250).

Bone's patronising guidelines land him in deep and murky water, as he attempts to legislate on the creative process. In his increasingly tenuous argument, it soon becomes clear that, since African-Americans can only ever fully experience black culture and black life, they have no authority to write about white culture.

³⁹ Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958; rev. 1965), 218, 226; hereafter abbreviated as *NNA*.

Bone's insistence on experience is not only patronising but problematic. As Henry Louis Gates has insightfully asked, to "insist we 'master our own culture' before learning others only defers the vexed question: what gets to count as 'our culture?'"⁴⁰ For Bone, an authentic African-American literature--and the term authentic is one that Bone employs--is one that reflects what he calls "a Negro quality in his experience," what he elsewhere refers to as the "fidelity to his deepest experience" (*NNA*, 3, 250). In contrast to "authentic" black American literature, Bone claims that "raceless" or "assimilationist" novels are not only largely "extra-literary," but they are "truncated, rootless and artificial" (*NNA*, 168, 248).

Importantly Bone explicitly acknowledges the relationship between "raceless" literature and the growing move towards assimilation, a fact that he fiercely contests (*NNA*, 248). Rather than reflecting the African-American's acceptance into mainstream American culture, Bone argues that assimilation is "a means of escape . . . a denial of one's racial identity," what he calls "a kind of psychological "passing" at the fantasy level." He continues:

⁴⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*

Basically it is the element of fantasy, the loss of contact with the realities of Negro life, which makes the assimilationist novel a blind alley. Written to demonstrate the author's personal emancipation (that is, his "whiteness"), it reveals too often the strength of his negative ties to the Negro group. Conscious avoidance of race is not freedom; it is merely an inverted form of bondage. It amounts in the last analysis to a kind of literary "passing," and like passing it is essentially an evasion (NNA, 248).

Bone's pejorative use of the words "fantasy" and "passing" raises several important points that are central to a discussion of *Giovanni's Room* and Baldwin's earlier essays. By equating fantasy with (unwanted) assimilation, Bone acknowledges the ways in which fantasy can disturb the "racial order" of a racially divided literature. In other words, "raceless" novels, such as *Giovanni's Room* threaten the stability of racial parameters, what Bone refers explicitly to as "walls" (NNA, 247).⁴¹ By equating "raceless" novels with "passing," Bone also points to

(Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 175.

⁴¹ See Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995) who notes that "fantasy" is etymologically rooted in the Greek word, *phantasikos*, meaning "to make visible" (13).

the ways in which *Giovanni's Room* upsets the boundaries that he is so adamant to defend. As Elaine Ginsberg has cogently argued:

when "race" is no longer visible, it is no longer intelligible: if "white" can be "black," what is white? Race passing thus not only creates, to use Garber's term, a *category crisis* but also destabilizes the grounds of privilege founded on racial identity.⁴²

Ginsberg arrestingly points to the ways in which *Giovanni's Room* problematises the very categories of black and white literature that I address at the end of this chapter. As I argue, by teasing the reader with hints of his characters' ambiguous racial identity, Baldwin disturbs and disrupts the racial order that Bone and others so forcefully outlined. But, as I argue in the following section, by portraying a character whose homosexuality is not visible--a character who is able to pass in both the straight and gay worlds--Baldwin also questioned the prevailing notion that sexuality could be readily identified by those attempting to scrutinise and categorise sexual differences.

⁴² Elaine K. Ginsberg, "Introduction," *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Ginsberg (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1996), 8.

2. Relocating *Giovanni's Room*: Homosexuality

Although I have focussed on *Bone* at some length, most criticism of the 1950s was too appalled by the homosexual subject matter to address the novel's absence of black characters. Whilst a handful of reviewers commended Baldwin's sensitive treatment of homosexuality, the praise was largely drowned out by criticism that praised the novel's style, whilst dismissing its content.⁴³ Charles Rolo, for example, begins by lauding Baldwin as a writer "endowed with exceptional narrative skill, poetic intensity of feeling, and a sensitive command of language." But, Rolo quickly adds--in a curiously sexual rhetoric-- "[t]his endorsement is made despite the fact that Mr. Baldwin's subject is one which I have had my fill."⁴⁴ Rolo's review exemplifies the reaction of a number of critics who reluctantly praise the stylistic accomplishment of the novel, whilst disdaining the

⁴³ For some positive comments on Baldwin's treatment of homosexuality, see Granville Hicks, "Tormented Triangle," *New York Times Book Review* (14 October 1956): 5; see also Nelson Algren, "Lost Man," *Nation* (1 December 1956): 434.

⁴⁴ Charles Rolo, "Other Voices, Other Rooms," *Atlantic Monthly* 198, 6 (December 1956): 98.

content.⁴⁵ Like Rolo, James Ivy's conservative aesthetic bemoans the fact that such beautiful writing should be wasted on such an ugly theme. In a review dismissively titled, "The Faerie Queens," Ivy concluded that it was a pity that "so much brilliant writing should be lavished on a relationship that by its nature is bound to be sterile and debasing." Ivy's review is notable, not only as a fine example of the predictable connections between homosexuality and sterility, but by his insistence that "frustration, despair, and death" are usually tragic in a heterosexual novel, but can only be "incongruous and crudely comic" in a tale about homosexuality.⁴⁶

Ivy's suggestion that the homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room* dilutes or even negates its tragedy and despair is paralleled by Anthony West, who, in an absurd review, chastises Baldwin for squandering valuable tourist time by only frequenting gay bars: "[t]his Paris is not the Paris of French life or even of tourist life; it is the Paris of the *métèques*." Not only that, but *Giovanni's Room*, West avers,

⁴⁵ For further examples, see Hicks, where he writes "even as one is dismayed by Mr. Baldwin's materials, one rejoices in the skill with which he renders them" (5).

⁴⁶ James Ivy, "The Faerie Queens," *Crisis* 64 (1957): 123. References to sterility in homosexual narratives are commonplace; see Austen, who cites Gore Vidal's weary parody: "the homosexual act does not produce children therefore it is sterile; Mr. X's

"completely lacks the validity of actual experience."⁴⁷ Presumably West means that an account of heterosexual tourism would constitute a "valid actual experience." Significantly, with his use of the word "métèques" (loosely, "wop," or "foreigner"), West both implies that the "real Paris" is neither gay nor multicultural, but also draws on Baldwin's ambiguous depictions of ethnicity, a point that I discuss below.

The refusal of critics to engage seriously with the theme of homosexuality is indicative both of the prevailing attitudes to dissident sexualities (which I discuss below) and also the ways in which left wing politics during the 1950s dismissed same-sex desire as a statement of oppositional practice. As Robert Corber has noted in his analysis of homosexuality during the Cold War, "even supposedly progressive critics," such as Leslie Fiedler, deflected the political significance of gay male writing, challenging its claim for a gay male identity.⁴⁸ By arguing that America did not have "a tradition of fiction asserting

book is concerned with the homosexual act therefore the book is sterile" (122).

⁴⁷ Anthony West, "Review of *Giovanni's Room*," *New Yorker* 32 (November 1956): 221, 222.

⁴⁸ Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997) 1; although Fiedler and other left wing critics denied the legitimacy of a homosexual identity, see Donald Webster Corey, *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach* (New York: Greenberg, 1951). Using the example of ethnic

(behind the most perfunctory of disguises) homosexual responses to experience as the cultivate norm," Fiedler argued that homosexual novels, rather than constituting a new genre, were subsumed into the larger American canon.⁴⁹ In his review of *Giovanni's Room*, for example (which I return to), Fiedler deflects the significance of the homosexual plot, stating that "it is a basic American plot--a staple of popular fiction." Baldwin's decision to cast Giovanni as homosexual, Fiedler contends, is little more than a "gimmick," a substitution of "the poor but worthy girl [for] a poor but worthy fairy."⁵⁰

Although Fiedler is well-known for espousing the centrality of homoeroticism in American literature (most notably in his 1948 essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!"), critics such as Robyn Wiegman have noted how his figuration of homosexuality (which, by 1960 he changed to "homoeroticism"), in fact cast "homosexuality as the immaturity of arrested sexual development."⁵¹ In "Come Back to the Raft," as Corber points out, Fiedler's reading of *The City and the*

minorities, Corey argued that homosexuality was a form of disempowerment comparable to ethnic minorities.

⁴⁹ Cited by Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 2.

⁵⁰ Leslie Fiedler, "A Homosexual Dilemma," *New Leader* 39, no. 10 (1956): 17.

⁵¹ Leslie Fielder, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!," *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. 1 (New York: Stein and

Pillar, like his reading of *Giovanni's Room*, refused to distinguish Vidal's novel from the mainstream of American fiction; rather, as Corber notes, Fiedler saw "its focus on gay male experience as business as usual because it supposedly conformed to the repressed and sentimentalizing homoerotic character of American literature."⁵²

The connection between *Giovanni's Room* and *The City and the Pillar* was made explicit by Baldwin's publishers. Readers at Knopf referred to the homosexual scenes in *Giovanni's Room* as "repugnant," whilst William Cole, in a wonderful *double-entendre*, concluded that "[i]t was judged not the time for an out-and-out homosexual novel. There had only been Gore Vidal's."⁵³ Knopf's comparison with *The City and the Pillar* indicates both the boldness of *Giovanni's Room* and also similarities between the two novels that go far beyond the theme of homosexuality. Prefacing a revised edition of *The City and the Pillar*, Vidal talks explicitly of how he wanted to shatter the stereotype of homosexuals as "shrieking queens or lonely bookish boys." Instead, Vidal recalls how his "two lovers were athletes and so . . . entirely

Day, 1971), 142-51; Robyn Wiegman, "Fiedler and Sons," *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, 50.

⁵² Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 137.

masculine that the feminine was simply irrelevant to their passion."⁵⁴ Although Baldwin is less explicit about his intention to shatter homosexual stereotypes, his reasons for using "the most ordinary type of American" he could find suggests a conscious decision to avoid the cultural signifiers of homosexuality that Vidal had sought to avoid. Like Vidal's protagonist, Baldwin's David is blonde and athletic, and like Jim Willard, David is contrasted with the negative depiction of an effeminate homosexual underworld.

The indistinguishable homosexuality of both David and Jim Willard suggests ways in which both Vidal and Baldwin were pointing towards the "naturalness" of a homosexual identity, one not defined in opposition to a dominant definition of masculinity. As I noted in my first chapter, Baldwin and Vidal's refusal to locate homosexuality along the axes of catalogued experiences, aligns them more with gay liberationists than with the more prevalent gay rights activists. In contrast to gay activists--who sought to align homosexuality with issues of social subordination--gay

⁵³ W. J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (London: Michael Joseph, 1990), 119.

⁵⁴ Gore Vidal, "Preface," *The City and the Pillar* (1949; reprint, with a new preface by Gore Vidal, London: Abacus, 1994), 3.

liberationists questioned the validity of sexual categorisation.⁵⁵

By portraying white masculine middle-class heroes, Vidal and Baldwin implicitly suggested the normalcy of the homosexual experience. In particular, the decision of both authors to cast their heroes, not as men trapped in women's bodies, but as strong, athletic and masculine, challenged the assumptions both that homosexuality was easily recognisable but also that masculinity was incompatible with homosexuality. But, as I argue in this section, the ability of both protagonists to "pass" as straight, fed into increasing anxieties over the policing of sexual--and in the case of *Giovanni's Room*--of racial boundaries. In other words, by figuring a protagonist who was "the most ordinary type of American" he could find, Baldwin responded directly both to contemporary fears of assimilation (and therefore miscegenation), and also to the Cold War consensus of homosexuality as a national security threat.

As various cultural critics, such as John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman have noted, the post-war period in America simultaneously saw a relaxing and a

⁵⁵ Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 139-40; Corber notes that Donald Webster Corey's study of homosexuality, *The*

tightening of sexual boundaries. During the war, America experienced significant demographic shifts as young people either joined the army or moved in search of labour, which in turn facilitated unprecedented opportunities for sexual activity that had been restricted by the more rigid pre-war nuclear family units.⁵⁶ The immediate post-war period saw an increase of the erotic within the public realm, illustrated by Hugh Hefner's launch of *Playboy* in 1953.⁵⁷ But even as the post-war period began to integrate the sexual into the public arena, there were increasing concerns about the dangers of immorality. Congress, for example, in 1952, piloted investigations into novels, magazines and comics to examine the impact of "immoral, obscene, or otherwise offensive matter." Post-war America, was "a society with Stop--Go lights flashing everywhere. Sex, its magic spell was everywhere, accompanied by the stern warning: Don't do it."⁵⁸

Nowhere was this confusing blend of sexual permissiveness and restraint more acute than in the treatment of homosexuality. The publication of Alfred Kinsey's reports on male and female sexual behaviour

Homosexual in America (1951) drew on Gunnar Myrdal's influential study of race relations, *An American Dilemma* (1944) (91).

⁵⁶ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York & Cambridge, etc.: Harper & Row, 1988), 260.

⁵⁷ D'Emilio and Freedman, 302.

in 1948 and 1953 respectively, shattered pervasive conceptions of sexual practice.⁵⁹ *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in particular catapulted the private sexual experiences of American men into the public arena like never before. Top of the best-seller lists in the *New York Times* for over six months, Kinsey revealed that "a considerable portion of the population, perhaps the major portion of the male population, has at least some [homosexual] sexual experience between adolescence and old age."⁶⁰

The impact of Kinsey's report was far-reaching enough to precipitate over two hundred studies on sexuality between 1948-9.⁶¹ Although Kinsey had set out to show that punishment for homosexuality was insensate, his report in fact contributed to a national homosexual panic. His advice, for example, that a "judge who is considering the case of a male who has been arrested for homosexual activity, should keep in mind that nearly 40 per cent of all other males in the town could be arrested at some time in their lives for similar activity," helped accelerate the policing of sexual boundaries instead of relaxing

⁵⁸ D'Emilio and Freedman, 282, 264.

⁵⁹ Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia & London: W.B. Saunders Company), 1948.

⁶⁰ Kinsey, 610.

them.⁶² In the District of Columbia, for example, near where Baldwin had grown up (he had by then moved to Paris), there were over a thousand arrests for homosexuality in the early 1950s.⁶³ What's more, Kinsey dismissed early reports that had attempted to register the degree of male and female characteristics in men and women. Repudiating the myths that gay people could be identified by their "[f]ine skins, high-pitched voices, [and] obvious hand movements," Kinsey insisted that homosexuals could "pass" as straight, indistinguishable in appearance from heterosexual men.⁶⁴

The increasing arrests for homosexuality in the 1950s point to the ways in which deviant sexuality became associated with threats to the nation's security. During the highly publicised hearings of the House Un-American Activities Commission in the 1940s and 1950s, the committee extended its investigations, not only to fears of Communist infiltration, but, as Robert Corber has noted, to "homosexuals and lesbians

⁶¹ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: the Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 35.

⁶² Kinsey, 664.

⁶³ D'Emilio and Freedman, 294.

⁶⁴ Kinsey, 637.

who 'passed' as heterosexual."⁶⁵ Following claims that several homosexuals had been dismissed in 1950 from the State Department, Senator Joseph McCarthy ordered a Senate inquiry into same-sex behaviour, which concluded that there were "no outward characteristics or physical traits" to positively identify homosexuals and lesbians. Effeminate men and masculine women, the medical report concluded, were not necessarily homosexual.⁶⁶

As is well documented, the report's findings were interpreted to argue that homosexuals did indeed constitute a security risk. In attempting to show that homosexuals and lesbians "be considered as proper cases for medical and psychiatric treatment," the official conclusion was that, since homosexuals were emotionally unstable, they were vulnerable to "the blandishments of the foreign espionage agent."⁶⁷

McCarthy's insistence on the threat of homosexuality to national security resulted in the dismissal of thousands of suspected sexual deviants.

⁶⁵ Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

⁶⁶ Corber, *In the Name of National Security*, 61; see also Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (New York & Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), who cites an article from the gentleman's magazine, *Sir!* from March 1958. The author warns that "Not All Homos Are Easy To Spot," and counsels the readers that, whilst 15-20 per cent of men are homosexual, less than 4 per cent are so "effeminate" that they can be recognized (131-2).

In fact more men and women were fired from government offices under the suspicion of homosexual practice than for alleged Communist connections.⁶⁸ Since homosexuality, it had been shown, could not be easily identified, the sexual behaviour of employees, whether in private industry, the army or government--as Elaine Tyler May has shown--"was considered to be a legitimate focus of investigation."⁶⁹ As Robert Corber has illustrated through his readings of Hollywood propaganda films such as *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), and *My Son John* (1952), these movies "encouraged the spectator to scrutinize her/ his psyche for an indication of sexual and/ or political deviance that might throw doubt upon her/ his loyalty."⁷⁰

Significantly the icy draughts of the Cold War era drifted over to Paris where Baldwin was living. In

⁶⁷ Corber, *In the Name of National Security*, 62-3.

⁶⁸ Corber, *In the Name of National Security*, 8.

⁶⁹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 95; see also David Savran, *Communist Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1992), who describes the "intense level of surveillance posted over the circulation of sexuality in and around the nuclear family facilitated an unprecedented level of social control" (9).

⁷⁰ Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security*, 99; Corber also notes how Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), with its emphasis on surveillance, critiques both the rise of technology and the curtailing of civil liberties (90, 100); see also Baldwin's discussion of *My Son John*, in "The Devil Finds Work," *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-85* (New York: St. Martin's/ Marek, 1985), 613-5; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Price*.

1953, there was a proliferation of newspaper headlines in Paris, such as *Le Monde's* "THE MANIA OF THE WITCH HUNT: EVERY DAY McCARTHY WEIGHS MORE HEAVILY ON THE LIVES OF AMERICANS."⁷¹ There were rumours that magazines such as *Paris Review* were being funded by the C.I.A., illustrated by Baldwin's wry remark that he covered the first International Conference of Black Writers and Artists in Paris, 1956, "for *Encounter* (or for the C.I.A.)"⁷² In Paris, as the poet Jan Logue recalls, "everybody thought everybody was informing on someone or other for somebody," paralleling Baldwin's recollection that, on his return to America, "friends were throwing their friends to the wolves, and justifying their treachery by learned discourses . . . on the treachery of the Comintern."⁷³ In letters of 1953 and 1954, during which he was writing *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin makes explicit references to the increasing police surveillance: "Nothing would please me more than to be able to hide from Ike, McCarran, Taft, and McCarthy," wrote Baldwin to his editor, Bill Cole, "--but there doesn't seem to be any place to

⁷¹ Campbell, *Exiled in Paris*, 92.

⁷² Cited by Campbell, *Exiled in Paris*, 91; James Baldwin, "No Name on the Street," *Price*, 464; for an excellent account of the C.I.A.'s involvement with left-wing journals, see Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999), esp. 184-9 on *Encounter*.

⁷³ Cited by Campbell, *Exiled in Paris*, 91; Baldwin, "No Name on the Street," *Price*, 464.

hide."⁷⁴ In a later letter to his agent Helen Strauss (1954), in which he describes the work in progress of *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin again refers to McCarthy, writing that he plans to return to New York, "though I wouldn't like McCarthy to hear this."⁷⁵

Baldwin's references to what he called his "obsession with the McCarthy Phenomenon," was more than mere paranoia.⁷⁶ The first known F.B.I. file on Baldwin--of which there are some seventeen hundred pages--appeared in 1951. In *The Devil Finds Work* Baldwin recollects being accosted by two agents. Noting that his colour had already made him "conspicuous," Baldwin concludes that the F.B.I. "frightened me and humiliated me--it was like being spat upon, or pissed on, or gang-raped."⁷⁷ Baldwin's recollection of the Bureau's violation painfully connects the ways in which he was scrutinised both for his sexual "perversion" and his racial identity by, as he recalled, "J. Edgar Hoover, history's most highly paid (and most utterly useless) voyeur."⁷⁸

As Maurice Wallace has cogently argued, the proliferation of surveillance files on Baldwin indicate "the spectacular conditions of historical

⁷⁴ James Baldwin to Bill Cole (January 1953), Indiana University.

⁷⁵ Cited by Helen Strauss to Philip Rahv (26 February, 1954).

⁷⁶ James Baldwin, "No Name on the Street," *Price*, 466.

black masculine identity and the chronic effort to 'frame' the black male body, criminally and visually."⁷⁹ On a more general level, Baldwin's (correct) belief that the C.I.A. were monitoring the first International Conference of Black Writers and Artists in Paris, 1956, points to larger concerns that civil rights organisations were overrun by Communists. There was a wide belief, not only that the *Board V. Brown* decision was a "Communist Plot," but, as a 1956 F.B.I. report "revealed," there was a "'tremendous' Communist presence among the State's Negro leadership."⁸⁰

The parallels between racial and sexual scrutiny are further illustrated by a shared rhetoric of pollution and contamination. In the Cold War rhetoric of aliens and germs ("Is your washroom breeding Bolsheviks?"), the language of pollution is inextricably bound to anxieties over racial and sexual contamination.⁸¹ The Senate report's finding of 1950 (*Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*), explicitly noted that one homosexual "can

⁷⁷ James Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," *Price*, 615.

⁷⁸ James Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," *Price*, 612.

⁷⁹ Maurice Wallace, "'I'm Not Entirely What I Look Like:' Richard Wright, James Baldwin and the Hegemony of Vision; or Jimmy's FBEye Blues," *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight McBride (New York & London: New York University Press, 1999), 300.

⁸⁰ Savran, 127; O'Reilly: 114.

⁸¹ Andrew Ross, 45.

pollute a Government office," paralleling pervasive fears of racial purity.

By drawing attention to the correlation between racial and sexual surveillance, to the fears of permeable borders, I want to emphasise the parallels between sexual and racial passing.⁸² As George Chauncey has argued in *Gay New York*, pre-Stonewall gay subculture communicated in an articulate form of coda, what he describes as "codes of dress, speech and style."⁸³ At a time when sixty federal employees a month were dismissed on the grounds of their sexuality, Chauncey notes how "[m]any gay men . . . described negotiating their presence in an often hostile world as living a double life, or wearing a mask and taking it off," an image that Gore Vidal explicitly draws upon.⁸⁴ In *The City and the Pillar*, Vidal notes how "the homosexual wore a stylized mask," adding that they were able to recognise one another "by a quick glance. . . . a form of freemasonry."⁸⁵ This correlation between homosexual passing and communism was made explicit by Arthur Schlesinger, who

⁸² See Marlon Ross, "Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (2000), where he links the rhetorical device of "playing the dozens" to the performance of camp (290-312).

⁸³ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Underworld, 1890-1940* (London: Flamingo, 1995), 4.

⁸⁴ D'Emilio and Freedman, 44; Chauncey, 6.

⁸⁵ Vidal, 148, 149.

in his attempts to show the secrecy and conspiracy of the American Communist Party, likened the dissenters to participants of gay male subculture. According to Schlesinger, Communists communicated to one another by recognising certain signals in an analogy that explicitly drew on gay "cruising." The Communists, Schlesinger insisted, could "identify each other (and be identified by their enemies) on casual meeting by the use of certain phrases, the names of certain friends . . . and certain silences."⁸⁶

The strategy of masking or enforced duplicity is a master trope in African-American literature, a point that I return to in the third section. Known variously as "Tomming," "Jumping Jim Crow," or "laughing to keep from crying," masking has historically been used by blacks in the presence of whites to maintain some semblance of empowerment in a racially prejudiced society. In *Souls of the Black Folk*, Du Bois speaks as one "from behind the veil," an image which suggests not only mourning but concealment. Similarly, Ralph Ellison writes of "our long habit of deception and evasion," a point illustrated by the rhetorical device of "signifying," which as Roger Abrahams has posited,

⁸⁶ Robert Corber, *In the Name of National Security*, 19, 19-20.

is a "technique of *indirect* argument."⁸⁷ In Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "We Wear the Mask," for example, Dunbar writes: "We wear the mask that grins and lies/ It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes/ This debt we pay to human guile."⁸⁸ Echoing Dunbar, the trope of the mask was used by Fanon, not least in his title, *Black Skins, White Masks*, and also by Baldwin who in *Notes of a Native Son*, writes of the wonder when a human being appears from "beneath the black mask."⁸⁹

In *Giovanni's Room*, a number of critics have concluded that Baldwin's characters are really black, masked only by a seemingly white narrative. I have mentioned Bone, but Georges-Michel Sarotte, for example, concludes that "David is the Harlem Negro in disguise--the author in a blond wig."⁹⁰ In his review of *Giovanni's Room*, Leslie Fiedler, makes explicit the fact that the novel's surface whiteness troubles him:

⁸⁷ Ralph Ellison, "Introduction to *Shadow and Act*," *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan, preface by Saul Bellow (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 58; cited by Michael G. Cooke, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1984), 25.

⁸⁸ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask," *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 896.

⁸⁹ James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Notes*, 158; see also Ralph Ellison, "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Face of Humanity," *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 81-9.

⁹⁰ Cited by Adams, 132.

there are not even any Negroes--and this, I must confess, makes me a little uneasy. . . . It is rather the fact that he [David] encounters no black faces in his movements through Paris and the south of France, that not even the supernumeraries are colored; so that one begins to suspect at last that there must really be Negroes present, censored, camouflaged or encoded.⁹¹

Fiedler's rhetoric of suspicion--"censored, camouflaged or encoded"--calls to attention the policing and surveillance of Cold War America: a fear of spying, infiltration and contamination that I have outlined. For Fiedler, *Giovanni's Room* only appears to have an all-white cast, but he continues to probe the text, using a language that becomes increasingly illogical and confused. How can black characters be both present and censored? Censored by whom? Does he mean that Baldwin's protagonists are really black, camouflaged by their white personas?

Fiedler's review implicitly suggests that Baldwin --as an African-American--must leave a trace of his ethnicity in the white world that he describes.⁹² And,

⁹¹ Leslie Fiedler, "A Homosexual Dilemma:" 16.

⁹² See also Leslie Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), where he writes: "one suspects Baldwin's *Giovanni* of being a Negro disguised as a European, and the book consequently of being a disguised Southern" (20).

like the eponymous sleuth in Twain's *Pudd'n head Wilson*, the detective-critic can scrutinise literary fingerprints to reveal an author's racial identity.⁹³ But Fiedler's anxiety, I suggest, also stems from his inability to locate firm racial boundaries. By insisting that there must be "camouflaged" black characters that he cannot locate, Fiedler suggests that Baldwin's scopically white (but racially "black") characters have "passed." Like Fanon, who writes of how the Jew "can sometimes go unnoticed," or Freud's observation that people of mixed race "resemble white people, but who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other," Fiedler struggles to locate a gesture or feature that will betray the characters' "real" blackness.⁹⁴

Fiedler's anxieties about the lack of visible black characters in *Giovanni's Room* articulate the ways in which the novel has been viewed as a hybridised or bastardised narrative. Neither wholly white nor wholly black, *Giovanni's Room* appears

⁹³ Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, ed. and introd. Malcolm Bradbury [1894] (London: Penguin, 1986). Twain's novel is fascinating in the ways that it explores the question of whether racial identity can ever be fully concealed; for an astute examination of these themes, see Adam Lively, *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (London: Vintage, 1999), esp. 171-7.

⁹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology*, Vol. 11, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1984), 195; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann [1952] (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 115.

miscegenated, impure. In my final section I will be addressing how we might categorise *Giovanni's Room* and other "raceless" novels by African-American authors. Picking up on Fiedler's notion of disguise, I will explore how far we can read Baldwin's novel, not as a narrative with camouflaged black characters, but one which invokes the trope of masking in African-American literature. An example, perhaps, of writing white.

3. What is African-American Literature?

In his seminal book on the ravages of colonialism, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'O recollects a conference held in Uganda in 1962, where African writers of English expression gathered to discuss the future of African literature. The discussions that followed, as Ngugi documents, quickly turned to how African literature might be defined: "Was it about Africa or about the African experience? Was it literature written by Africans? What about a non-African who wrote about Africa? What if an African set his work in Greenland: did that qualify as African literature?"⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'O, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*, [1986] (London & Nairobi: James Currey Ltd & Heinemann, 1994), 6; see also Chinua Achebe, "The

The deceptively simple questions raised at the conference offer a useful framework for asking, "what is African-American literature?" What happens if a novel, like *Giovanni's Room*, is written by a black American author, but is set in Europe without an African-American character? The questions raised belie a concern with authorship and authority: a need to outline an authentic literature that can be stamped, legitimated, approved, illustrated by Salman Rushdie's observation that ethnic literature is praised as "an expression of nationality," whilst books that "mix traditions" or stray from their cultural habitat are regarded as suspect.⁹⁶

Although I focus on the issues raised by *Giovanni's Room's* "whiteness," I begin by briefly exploring the historical imbrication of whiteness and homosexuality in African-American social and literary history in order to examine the ways in which homosexuality has historically inauthenticated black American literature.⁹⁷ During the 1960s in particular, a growing number of younger black radicals such as LeRoi Jones and Eldridge Cleaver explicitly linked

African Writer and the English Language," *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (New York: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1975), 91-103.

⁹⁶ Rushdie, 66.

⁹⁷ See Gregory Conerly, "Are You Black First Or Are You Queer," *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed.

homosexuality with whiteness, arguing that same-sex desire was a specifically white perversion. In his essay "American Sexual Reference" (1965), LeRoi Jones, for example, explicitly stated that "[m]ost white men are trained to be fags," since the lack of physical labour had rendered them "effeminate and perverted."⁹⁸ In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver took the association of whiteness and homosexuality one step further, by arguing that black homosexuality evinced a desire for whiteness:

Many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby with a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching the toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves--though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm.⁹⁹

Delroy Constantine-Simms, introd. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2001), 7-23.

⁹⁸ Cited by Georges-Michel Sarotte, *Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Males Homosexuality in the American Novel and Theatre From Herman Melville to James Baldwin*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1978), 94.

⁹⁹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, introd. Maxwell Geismar (New York & London: Ramparts, 1968), 102.

According to Cleaver, black homosexuality was a direct result of an identification with whiteness: this in turn, Cleaver argued, led to a de-virilisation of the black male subject who subsequently denied his own blackness. Like a number of black writers--including Ishmael Reed--Cleaver argued that black homosexuality rendered the queer African-American as inauthentic. Put simply, homosexuality negated blackness.

Importantly, Baldwin was the most visible and vulnerable target in an increasingly homophobic era, a point that I discussed in my previous chapter. But even critics who discussed the theme of homosexuality positively in their work, tended to assume that *Giovanni's Room* illustrated Baldwin's dislike of blackness.¹⁰⁰ In his survey of homosexuality in American fiction and theatre, *Like a Brother, Like a Lover*, for example, Georges Michel-Sarotte argues that Baldwin "is a homosexual black locked in a love-hate relationship with a white, wanting to be him." Baldwin's sexuality, Sarotte, concludes, "seems somehow based on his horror at being black."¹⁰¹ Sarotte's comments on Baldwin highlight the ways in

¹⁰⁰ See James Baldwin "Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes," *The White Problem in America*, ed. the editors of *Ebony* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., 1966), where he writes that "I have known many black men and women . . . who really believed that it was better to be white than black . . . I myself carried the seeds of this destruction with me for a long time" (176).

which *Giovanni's Room* has problematised Baldwin's reputation as a "black" writer. In Calvin C. Hernton's *White Papers for White Americans*, this is made explicit:

[p]sychologically, [Baldwin] embraced the white world and especially identified with young, handsome, blond males. Realizing, however, that this was no solution to his agony, he confessed that one day he could hate white people as much as he did Negroes.¹⁰²

Hernton's brief analysis implicitly links homosexuality with a desire for whiteness. As I noted in my previous chapter, it was only with the publication/ performance of *Blues For Mister Charlie* (1964) that Baldwin, according to Hernton, undid some of the damage by reinstating himself as aggressive and masculine, and therefore as an authentic black subject.

Further examples of the ways in which *Giovanni's Room* has problematised Baldwin's reputation can be found by the glaring absence of critical commentary. In one notable example, Houston Baker's essay, "The Embattled Craftsman," seeks to rescue Baldwin's

¹⁰¹ Sarotte, 98.

¹⁰² Calvin C. Hernton, *White Papers For White Americans* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 114.

tarnished reputation in the 1970s. Rightly noting that Baldwin had been accused of ambivalence towards black culture, Baker attempts to reify Baldwin's "'engaged' Black voice," arguing that he is indeed "representative of timeless impulses in Black American culture." Significantly, this long essay, which surveys Baldwin's canon, leaves out any discussion of *Giovanni's Room*.¹⁰³

Baker's deliberate avoidance of Baldwin's "white" novel in his reification of the latter's use of and contribution to black culture suggests a tacit acknowledgement that *Giovanni's Room* is somehow not black enough. Although, as I have outlined, Baldwin's depictions of homosexuality, have, to some extent, rendered *Giovanni's Room* "inauthentic" as a work of black literature, the paucity of criticism on other "white" novels by black American authors suggests that homosexuality is not the only cause of neglect. Claudia Tate's recent book, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998) convincingly shows the ways in which, before the 1980s, African-American novels that "failed to manifest the sociological factors of an oppressive 'black experience,'" risked deliberate censure and

¹⁰³ Houston A. Baker, Jr., "The Embattled Craftsman: An Essay on James Baldwin," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), 63.

neglect.¹⁰⁴ Three notable examples are Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Chester Himes's *Cast the First Stone* (1954), and Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954), all of which contain no major black protagonists. Whilst Wright's *Native Son* and Hurston's *Their Eyes are Watching God* in particular are often required reading on American or African-American university courses, the absence of racism--and of principal African-American characters--in their "white" novels has led to their expulsion to the literary dust-heap.¹⁰⁵

Tate's insightful analysis of neglected African-American narratives implicitly asks not only what constitutes African-American literature, but how the African-American canon is formed. The perennial question remains, as Henry Louis Gates has posited: "[i]s 'black' poetry racial in theme, or is 'black' poetry any sort of poetry written by black people?"¹⁰⁶ In order to examine this question, I am going to turn back briefly to Ngugi in order to suggest ways in which *Giovanni's Room* might be read.

¹⁰⁴ Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁰⁵ In the otherwise excellent, *The Essential Black Literature Guide*, ed. Roger M. Valade III (New York: Visible Ink Press, 1996), there is no mention of Hurston's novel, despite a listing of her other work. See also Claudia Tate, esp. ch. 3 & 5 on Wright and Hurston respectively. Tate notes that *Savage Holiday* "had no reviews in American newspapers or magazines" (86).

Despite the fact that the African writers present at the conference could not decide on how to define African literature, Ngugi's own views were uncompromising. As is well known, Ngugi forcefully rejected the use of English to convey his experience, insisting that literature written by Africans in English "is not African literature."¹⁰⁷ Arguing that language is "the control through culture, of how people perceive themselves and their relationship to the world," Ngugi argued that African literature, written in English not only failed to capture the black experience, but legitimised colonialism.¹⁰⁸ In contrast to Ngugi, the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, insists that English can carry the weight of his experience; not only is the use of English a pragmatic necessity, but Achebe argues that English has become an African language.¹⁰⁹ By adapting English to an African english, by de-centring the colonial language, Achebe insists that the African writer should "aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry out his peculiar experience."¹¹⁰

The debates between Ngugi and Achebe usefully illustrate one way of approaching the implications of

¹⁰⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons*, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Ngugi, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Ngugi, 16.

Baldwin's "white" novel. Ngugi's repudiation of African literature written in English has parallels with the black aesthetic in America of the mid 1960s, which rejected African-American literature written in imitation of white western forms. Hoyt Fuller's essay, for example, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," strongly echoes Ngugi in his rejection of "the literary assumption that the style and language and the concerns of Shakespeare establish the appropriate limits and 'frame of reference' for black poetry and people."¹¹¹ Similarly, LeRoi Jones famously argued in "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" (1962) that, since black American literature was based on white literary forms, no authentic African-American literature had yet been written.¹¹²

Whereas Jones dismisses the use of white literary forms, Achebe's aim to de-centralise English suggests a different way of reading *Giovanni's Room*: not as a homage to white literary antecedents, but as an example of what Elleke Boehmer has termed "the cultural boomerang or switchback," the mode of using

¹⁰⁹ Achebe, 101.

¹¹⁰ Achebe, 100.

¹¹¹ Hoyt W. Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," *The Black Aesthetic*, 8.

¹¹² LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* [1966] (New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1998), 105-115.

the dominant language and appropriating it.¹¹³ In Achebe's essay, "The African Writer and the English Language," the Nigerian writer draws explicitly from Baldwin's letter to the *Observer* in the early 1960s:

My quarrel with the English language had been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter another way. . . . Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it. If this were so, then it might be made to bear the burden of my experience if I could find the stamina to challenge it, and me, to such a test.¹¹⁴

Whilst Achebe concludes that "Baldwin's problem is not exactly mine," the dialogue between Baldwin and Achebe's writing illustrates the ways in which *Giovanni's Room* can be read.¹¹⁵

To conclude this section, I suggest that we can read Baldwin's essays of the 1950s as a logical progression to his fictional creation of *Giovanni's Room*. What Philip Auger, in a discussion of *Giovanni's Room*, concludes as "Baldwin's negotiations with language to find his own space within language--in

¹¹³ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 210.

¹¹⁴ Cited by Achebe, 103.

effect . . . to establish a new discursive foundation for producing a positive sense of meaning in being an Afro-American novelist and Afro-American man."¹¹⁶ Or, in Baldwin's words, a move towards his premise that "[t]he root function of language . . . is to control the universe by describing it."¹¹⁷ In other words, I am suggesting that we can read *Giovanni's Room*, not just as a homage or imitation of white literary narratives--such as *The Sun Also Rises* or *The Ambassadors*--but something more subversive.

In *Notes of a Native Son*, which I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, Baldwin frequently switches register, so that it is difficult to place the authorial voice. For example, in "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin's racial identity becomes textually ambiguous as he aligns himself with the (white) authorial voice:

Up to today we are set at a division, so that he may not marry our daughters or our sisters, nor may he--for the most part--eat at our tables or live in our houses. Moreover, those who do, do so at the grave expense of a double

¹¹⁵ Achebe, 103.

¹¹⁶ Philip Auger, *Native Sons in Native Sons in No Man's Land: Rewriting Afro-American Manhood in the Novels of Baldwin, Walker, Wideman, and Gaines* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.: 2000), 16.

alienation: from *their* own people, whose
 fabled attributes *they* must deny
 (emphasis mine).¹¹⁸

The passage begins with a "we" that is at first ambiguous: it is not clear whether Baldwin refers to "we" African-Americans, "we" white Americans, or a collective "we." It soon becomes clear that the "he" is the African-American male subject, objectified from a dominant (white) position. In the next sentence Baldwin collapses these divisions, where the "*their* own people," becomes a shared possessive adjective, suggesting, as Lawrie Balfour has argued, "how the constitution of an 'American' identity had been connected to the degradation of black Americans."¹¹⁹

Baldwin's use of racially interchanging pronouns infuriated and bemused a number of black and white critics alike.¹²⁰ As Balfour has recently posited, by the 1960s, black nationalists saw Baldwin's experimental white persona as "the obliteration of *his* own personality, the distortion and debasement of *his*

¹¹⁷ Cited by C.W.E. Bigsby, "The Divided Mind of James Baldwin," *James Baldwin: Modern Critical Views*, 119.

¹¹⁸ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," *Notes*, 31.

¹¹⁹ Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 31.

¹²⁰ See also Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1977), where he notes that "Baldwin's 'we' sometimes wobbles in the early essays, acting out his predicament by assuming now a white, now a black face . . ." (173).

own experience."¹²¹ Langston Hughes, for example, bemoaned that "Baldwin's viewpoints are half-American, half-Afro-American, incompletely fused."¹²² Hughes's implicit criticism that Baldwin's voice is illegitimate--a bastard hybrid of black and white--is turned round by Baldwin, who refers to himself as both an interloper and as a Bastard of the West.¹²³ However, in contrast to Hughes's derogation of his white/ black voice, Baldwin himself reifies his cultural indeterminacy. "In a profound way," Baldwin wrote in 1955, "I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres . . . a special attitude" (my emphasis).¹²⁴ Baldwin's "special attitude" is in part explained by the distinction that he makes between birthright and inheritance. In his revised introduction to *Notes of a Native Son* (1984), Baldwin notes that, whilst his "inheritance was particular, specifically limited and limiting," his birthright "was vast," enabling him to

¹²¹ Balfour, 49.

¹²² Cited by Leeming, 101.

¹²³ See also Stanley Crouch, "The Rage of Race," *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979-1989* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), where he criticises Baldwin's European frame of reference (232); see also Stewart Smith and Peter Thorn, "An Interview with LeRoi Jones," *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, ed. Charlie Reilly [1966] (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), where Baraka also denounces Baldwin's references to Europe (17).

¹²⁴ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes*, 14; see also "Notes for *The Amen Corner*," where Baldwin refers again to "the specialness of my condition . . . [in] France" (10).

connect "to all that lives, and to everyone forever."¹²⁵

Importantly, Baldwin stresses that his birthright must be claimed through language: he refers to his writing as a deliberate appropriation of white culture, allowing him to break free from his inheritance. In *Notes of a Native Son*, published in 1955, Baldwin writes: "I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine--I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme--otherwise I would have no place in any scheme" ("AN," 14). Rather than rejecting the cornerstones of white culture, Baldwin transforms them into his own particular writing voice.

In his discussion of appropriating white culture, Baldwin evinces what Michael Awkward terms "a disruptive invocation" of a seemingly white narrative.¹²⁶ As Houston Baker has posited in his defence of the Harlem Renaissance, the similarities between white and black narrative techniques are not merely mimetic. Although a number of critics have concluded that the Renaissance failed to produce a distinctly black writing, Baker argues rather that

¹²⁵ James Baldwin, "Introduction to *Notes of a Native Son*," (1984) *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, selected by Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 810.

Countee Cullen's "ballads," or Claude McKay's "sonnets" can be read as "much mastered masks," what he also refers to as "the denigration of form--a necessary ('forced,' as it were) adoption of the standard that results in an effective *blackening*."¹²⁷ Baker's work suggests ways in which we might read Baldwin's ostensibly white narrative as a strategic de-centring--or blackening--of a white narrative; what Robert Corber refers to as Baldwin's "creolizing appropriation of [Henry] James's narrative techniques."¹²⁸ By "appropriating" white centuries--to invoke Baldwin's term--Baldwin displaces the primacy of a white narrative, creating what he calls his "special attitude."

As critics such as Lawrie Balfour have recently noted, Baldwin is now rightly recognised as an early critic of the primacy of whiteness.¹²⁹ As I examine in my following chapter, Baldwin's work, though at times inconsistent, repeatedly critiques the notion of an essential whiteness and blackness. Troping on Du

¹²⁶ Awkward, 17.

¹²⁷ Houston Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 85. Earlier, Baker writes "it is, first and foremost, the mastery of the minstrel mask by blacks that constitutes a primary move in Afro-American modernism" (17).

¹²⁸ Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 162.

¹²⁹ Balfour, 16; Baldwin repeatedly draws attention to the legal construction of race: see "Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes," for example, where JB refers to secretaries who were "legally white" (179).

Bois's famous utterance that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line," Baldwin argues rather that the problem of the twentieth century is being white.¹³⁰ Although this is most keenly articulated in Baldwin's later work, which argued that "there are no white people," Baldwin's comments in *Notes of a Native Son* strongly echo those of Frantz Fanon in *White Skins, Black Masks*.¹³¹ Fanon's conclusion that "[t]here is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence," is mirrored by the last sentence in *Notes*, which reads, "[t]his world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."¹³²

Baldwin's repeated insistence on the fictionality of whiteness ("[c]olour is a great American myth") foregrounds more recent theories that have argued for the need to consider "the invention of the category of whiteness as well as of blackness."¹³³ In particular

¹³⁰ W.E.D. Du Bois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," *The Souls of the Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver [1903] (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 17.

¹³¹ James Baldwin, "On Being 'White' . . . and Other Lies," *Essence* (April 1984): 90, 92.

¹³² Fanon, 229; James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Notes*, 165.

¹³³ James Baldwin and John Hall, "James Baldwin: A Transition Interview," *Transistion*, 0, no. 41 (1972): 22; Hazel Carby, "Multicultural Wars," *Radical History Review* 54 (1992): 12. For work on the construction of whiteness, see Alexander Saxton's *Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990); David Roediger's, *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991); Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992); Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface and Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993); Theodore Allen's *The Invention*

several critics have drawn attention to the absence of a theoretical framework that draws attention to a black American appropriation of whiteness. Robert Fox, for example, notes that, whilst "[w]e know about the minstrels, white and black, who put on blackface," there is little work on "those, who, identity-wise, put on whiteface."¹³⁴ Similarly, Reginald McKnight has argued that there is no critical term for "blacks who perform, in way or another . . . the white 'thing' except for the term 'crossover' which applies not only to blacks but to everyone else as well."¹³⁵ McKnight goes on to argue that, whilst black artists such as Jimmy Hendrix or Richie Havens (a list that we might add Baldwin to), are praised for their talents, there is no recognition of what McKnight calls their "mastery of art forms that could be referred to as decidedly 'white.'" Not only is there no recognition of such appropriation, but, whilst black influenced culture (such as rock and roll) seems to enrich white

of the White Race (1994); Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995).

¹³⁴ Robert Fox, "Becoming Post-White," *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*, ed. Ishmael Reed (London & New York: Penguin, 1998), 10.

¹³⁵ Reginald McKnight, "Confessions of a Wannabe Negro," *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, ed. Gerald Early (New York & London: Allen Lane, 1993), 104.

culture, "white-influenced blacks are regarded as weakened, diluted, less black."¹³⁶

McKnight's discussion of the terms "crossover" and "mastery of art forms," raises wider issues that I want to end with. One recent essay on *Giovanni's Room* concludes that "for many whites . . . the question is whether Baldwin's identity is too miscegenated, impure, for him to serve reliably as a mediator, a spokesman, between dominant America and the black experience of America."¹³⁷ Yet one simple but important question cries out: would *Giovanni's Room* have elicited the same response if Baldwin been white? We might also consider whether William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (which I examine in the following chapter) would have generated such outrage by black critics if the novel had instead been written by Baldwin.

Whatever the answer is, there is a pervasive tendency of critics to police the boundaries of authentic experience. As the reception of *Giovanni's Room* reminds us, there is still a clinging assumption,

¹³⁶ McKnight, 104. In *Negotiating Difference*, Michael Awkward makes the distinction between "passing" and what he terms "transracial" narratives. In contrast to passing, which is predicated on the lightness of one's skin, "transraciality," "represents an individually determined, surgically and/ or cosmetic-assisted traversal of boundaries that putatively separate radically distinct social groups" (180).

¹³⁷ Marlon B. Ross, 26.

as Henry Louis Gates has argued, that novels "transparently convey the authentic, unmediated experience of the authors' social identities."¹³⁸ And yet, as countless examples remind us, such social identities are not easy to spot. Whilst Louis Simpson confidently concluded that "I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro," and Irving Howe insisted that no white person could have written *Invisible Man*, other critics remain less certain.¹³⁹ According to Colin MacInnes, *Giovanni's Room* is written "so successfully that anyone who did not know what race he [is] . . . could never guess . . . that he was other than white himself?," a point forcefully illustrated by W.J. Weatherby's first encounter with Baldwin.¹⁴⁰ As Weatherby called on Baldwin's apartment, he expected to find a white professor:

I realized then the mistake I'd made:
this was Baldwin; I'd completely misread
Giovanni's Room. Because there were no
black characters in the novel, it never

¹³⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "'Authenticity:'" 26.

¹³⁹ Cited by Fuller, 4; Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Selected Writings, 1950-1990* (San Diego, New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1990), 129.

¹⁴⁰ Colin MacInnes, "Dark Angel: The Writings of James Baldwin," *Encounter* 21 (July-December 1963): 26.

occurred to me that the author might be black.¹⁴¹

Weatherby's misguided assumption is not unique. When Dan McCall published *The Man Says Yes* in 1969, a novel about a young black teacher, many critics assumed that the author was black, too. The *Amsterdam News*, for example, referred to the author throughout as "brother McCall," until they discovered that the author was white; similarly Danny Santiago's *All Over Town*, set in a Los Angeles barrio, was praised by Latino critics for its vibrancy and authenticity. The author in fact turned out to be Daniel James a septuagenarian Yale-educated WASP.¹⁴² Vernon Sullivan's novel about "passing," *I Will Spit on Your Graves*, published in France in 1946, was reputedly written by a light-skinned African-American--and is almost certainly a novel Baldwin would have read or at least heard of.¹⁴³ Critics who had praised Sullivan's novel, comparing it to *Native Son*, were less forthcoming when it transpired that Sullivan did not exist: he was merely

¹⁴¹ W.J. Weatherby, *Squaring Off: Mailer V. Baldwin* (London: Robson Books, 1977), 7.

¹⁴² Gates, "'Authenticity:'" 28, 29.

¹⁴³ See James Baldwin, "The Devil Finds Work," *Price*, where he discusses the film version of the novel (579-583).

the *nomme de plume* of a white French writer, Boris Vian.¹⁴⁴ The list could go on.

Perhaps what these novels all have in common is the difficulty in measuring cultural authenticity. If Boris Vian was deeply influenced by Richard Wright, then so too were black protest writers like John A. Williams. Whilst African-American vernacular--and in particular the spirituals--are praised as distinctly black, then it should be remembered that they took their form from the King James Version of the Old and New Testaments. If, as Don Lee asserted, "a true test for a black poem/ is whether you can tell the author's color," novels such as *Giovanni's Room* continue to problematise such definitions.¹⁴⁵ Perhaps nowhere is this more acutely illustrated than in the jazz trumpeter Roy Eldridge's claim to the critic Leonard Feather that he could distinguish white musicians from black. As Mr. Feather slid the needle into the groove of new records--whose titles were concealed from the trumpeter--Eldridge began to segregate the black musicians from the white. More than half the time, Eldridge guessed wrong.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ See James Campbell, *Exiled in Paris*, 16-18; see also J.K.L. Scott, *From Dreams to Despair: An Integrated Reading of the Novels of Boris Vian* (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 16.

¹⁴⁵ Don L. Lee, "Towards a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties," *The Black Aesthetic*, 227-8.

¹⁴⁶ Gates, "'Authenticity:'" 1.

4. Locating Boundaries in *Giovanni's Room*

In my first chapter I drew attention to the ways in which Baldwin's decision to leave America was fuelled by his refusal to buy into the pervasive and limiting rules that governed sexual classification. In "Here Be Dragons," Baldwin recalls that, whilst, "[o]n every street corner I was called a faggot," his same tormentors fled hungrily into his arms.¹⁴⁷ These clandestine lovers, Baldwin notes, did not look like homosexuals: they looked "like cops, football players, soldiers, sailors, Marines or bank presidents, admen, boxers, construction workers; they had wives, mistresses, and children."¹⁴⁸

Baldwin's emphasis on the heterogeneity of same-sexual experiences evinces his refusal to reduce sexual practice to a recognisable or locatable type. Echoing his attempts to become an American, not just an African-American writer, Baldwin's writing on same-sex desire documents the complexity and irreducibility of both sexual and racial identities. After a brief affair with an older Harlem racketeer, Baldwin recalls with relief how "all of the American categories of

¹⁴⁷ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 684.

¹⁴⁸ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 684.

male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life."¹⁴⁹

Baldwin's insistence on the complexity of sexual experience had been articulated in his essay, "The Preservation of Innocence," where, as I noted, Baldwin argued that it was not possible to write a novel about a Jew, Gentile or homosexual, "for people refuse, unhappily, to function in so neat and one-dimensional a fashion."¹⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, given his earlier views, Baldwin was adamant that *Giovanni's Room* "is not really a novel about homosexuality." Rather, Baldwin stated, it is "the vehicle through which the novel moves."¹⁵¹

As I noted earlier in this chapter, Baldwin's decision to depict a white middle class and masculine protagonist in *Giovanni's Room* suggests that he was challenging assumptions both that homosexuality was easily recognisable (as I have illustrated with the scrutiny of homosexual "characteristics"), but also that masculinity was incompatible with homosexuality.¹⁵² For Baldwin in particular, as he

¹⁴⁹ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 681.

¹⁵⁰ James Baldwin, "The Preservation of Innocence," *Zero* (spring 1949): 21.

¹⁵¹ Richard Goldstein, "Go The Way Your Blood Beats: An Interview with James Baldwin," *Village Voice* 26 (June 1984): 13.

¹⁵² For a brief but useful overview of how depictions of masculinity shifted during the 1950s, see Richard Meyer, "Rock

recollected in "Here Be Dragons," the "American ideal of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American idea of masculinity:"

This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an idea so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden--as an unpatriotic act--that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood.¹⁵³

Baldwin's critique of the way that America stifles the complex passage into manhood interrogates the ways in which boundaries are maintained through repudiation. Or, as Baldwin stated more explicitly, "[p]eople invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity," and "[s]traight people invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves."¹⁵⁴

Baldwin's criticism of identities that are forged through the negation and/ or abjection of the deviant calls to mind more recent theories of sexual

Hudson's Body," *Inside/ Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), 259-88.

¹⁵³ James Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 678.

¹⁵⁴ James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, foreword by Ida Lewis, afterword by Orde Coombs (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), 88.

difference that argue that positive heterosexual identity exists only in relation to negativity, through a pathologising of homosexuality.¹⁵⁵ In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin explores the ways in which the boundaries of masculinity and heterosexuality are maintained through the rigorous repudiation of homosexuality. Through David, his protagonist and narrator, Baldwin shows the devastating effects of a regulatory "American ideal of sexuality" that can only locate desire for men in the infantile dyads of gay and straight, masculine and feminine.

In *Giovanni's Room*, David's masculinity is framed early in the narrative by his father's insistence that he wanted his son to be "a man. And when I say a man . . . I don't mean a Sunday school teacher" (GR, 20). Although his (nameless) father attempts "a masculine candour" with his son, David rejects this, acknowledging that he was in flight from him. David's disidentification with his father and his masculinity is paralleled by his lack of identification with the feminine. Ellen, David's aunt, threatens the young boy by her terrifying performance of femininity. She is "always over-dressed, over made-up, with a face and figure beginning to harden." Her knitting is menacing,

¹⁵⁵ See for example Diana Fuss, "Introduction," *Inside/ Out*, 1-10.

described as "dangerous," whilst her painted mouth was "redder than any blood," uttering hard words "like a razor blade on glass" (*GR*, 17). The hardness of the living Ellen is contrasted by the sickly softness of David's dead mother, who returns to haunt him in his nightmares:

blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive (*GR*, 16).

David's image of the feminine is repulsive and horrific; one so soft and overbearing that it threatens to swallow him alive in a reversal of the birthing process. It is an image that anticipates his later disgust for Hella, whose body, David finds "grotesque" after his affair with Giovanni; he is "fantastically intimidated by her breasts, and when I entered her I began to feel that I would never get out alive" (*GR*, 149).

The terrifying images of a decaying femininity engulf David again after his brief adolescent fling with Joey. The affair begins as David and Joey are "horsing around" in the shower, recalling the playful

tussling of Jim and Bob by the river in *The City and the Pillar*. Experiencing the pleasure of his lovemaking with Joey, David recollects that it "seemed . . . that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love" (GR, 14). The idyllic moment is abruptly ruptured when David is suddenly shocked by "the power in his [Joey's] thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists" (GR, 14). At the very moment when David reads the physical signifiers of Joey's masculinity, he is horrified at his actions: "I was suddenly afraid. It was borne on me: *But Joey is a boy!*" (GR, 14). What began as a joyful experience enacted in the purifying space of the shower-room, quickly turns to a terrifying decadence that recalls the horrifying decay of dead femininity:

That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me. . . . A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern (GR, 14).

The "black opening of a cavern," is suggestive both of the anus and of the vagina. The cavern recalls David's fear that he will be literally subsumed by his mother's "breach" and that he will never return from the depths of Hella's body. But David's fear is that he will lose his manhood in the cavern, suggesting a phobic fear of the anus that threatens to subsume his penis, and therefore his masculinity. The cavern/anus, becomes, for David, what Ellis Hanson describes as "that abjected space that gay men are obliged to inhabit; that space unspeakable, unnameable, itself defined as orifice, as a 'dark continent.'" ¹⁵⁶

As an unknown (and possibly unknowable) site, the cavern suggests an obliteration of boundaries. The cavern, so suggestive of David's fear of homosexuality, like the ocean, threatens to obliterate the boundaries that David desperately holds on to. In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin reinforces the image of boundaries by his distinction between dirt and cleanliness. In contrast to David's fantasy of heterosexual family life, which occurs in "light and safety," homosexual encounters are played out underground, "following all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenues, into what dark places" (GR,

¹⁵⁶ Ellis Hanson, "Undead," *Inside/ Out*, 325.

81). The references to dark avenues are reminiscent of the cavern, and like the cavern, they suggest anality, a space, suggested by "God knows what," that cannot be named in a Christian world. David's fear, which he hides in his condemnation of Jacques, is that he too, will "kneel down forever before an army of boys for just five dirty minutes in the dark" (GR, 56).

Homosexuality becomes for David, synonymous with dirt, shit and filth, whereas heterosexuality and masculinity are associated with cleanliness and innocence. David, as Jacques taunts, is proud of his "immaculate manhood," just as he does "not want to stink, not even for five minutes" (GR, 33, 134). David becomes like the asexual Americans in the novel, smelling of soap, which is "their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor" (GR, 86).

The distinction between dirt and cleanliness in *Giovanni's Room* illustrates the ways in which David struggles to maintain the boundaries between masculinity and heterosexuality and femininity and homosexuality. Dirt, as Mary Douglas has famously articulated, is "essentially disorder," and although Douglas does not explore the relationship between dirt/ shit and homosexuality, her work illustrates the way that dirt/ homosexuality threaten, as Douglas

notes, to "confuse or contradict cherished classifications."¹⁵⁷ To clean, Douglas avers, is not to avoid disease, but is an act of "placing boundaries," which David does in his determination to remain pure.¹⁵⁸

As unknowable as the cavern, the sea functions in *Giovanni's Room* as an uncharted space that threatens to dissolve the boundaries that David clings to. "[N]othing is more unbearable," David remarks at the start of the novel, "than freedom" (GR, 11). Freedom for David will propel him towards that which he is avoiding, which he attempts to avoid "by elaborate systems of evasion" (GR, 25). Frightened at his glimpse of the cavern, which suggests the unknown, David attempts to counter this by grounding himself in the role of traditional heterosexual masculinity: "I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to" (GR, 11). By anchoring himself to Hella, David hopes that his "manhood [will be] unquestioned:"

I wanted children. . . . and I wanted to
rise in the morning knowing where I was.
I wanted a woman to be for me a steady

¹⁵⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 2, 36.

¹⁵⁸ Douglas, 68.

ground, like the earth itself, where I
could be always be renewed (GR, 100).

In contrast to David's desire for "steady ground," his relationship with Giovanni "seemed to be occurring underwater," and with water lapping at their feet, so that he feels "unanchored" (GR, 82, 101, 62).¹⁵⁹ It is only by seducing Sue, in his need "to find a girl, any girl," that David can reaffirm his sense of masculinity, and therefore his repudiation of the unknown (GR, 91). In contrast to the possibility of obliteration that the cavern and water suggest, Sue is compared to a "walled city" whose gates allow David to enter.

David's desperate attempts to prove his (heterosexual) virility are further suggested by his attempts to distinguish himself from the homosexual underworld. In contrast to Guillaume and Jacques, who are described as "old theatrical sisters," David is introduced as "this great American football player" (GR, 34). Describing the locals of Guillaume's bar as "les folles," David is quick to distinguish himself from the queens who "would swoop in," "screaming like parrots," referring to each other as "she," crowding round the centre of gossip "like a peacock garden . .

. [that] sounded like a barnyard" (GR, 30). In contrast, Giovanni and David do not spend time in the bar; do not mix with "*les folles*." Giovanni is quick to make distinctions between the likes of Guillaume and Jacques, and his relationship with David: it is "*they*" who are all "disgusting," clearly distinguishing their more masculine love (GR, 105). And it is at the height of Giovanni's downfall that David notes, with disgust, that his former lover has begun to affect "a fairy's mannerisms," just as he distinguishes himself by recollecting his affair with a "fairy" in the army (GR, 139).

Giovanni's move in the course of the novel, from a masculine homosexuality to that of the "fairy," illustrates the ways that the sexual roles are more fluid than David likes to imagine. In fact, it also points to the implicit difficulties that Baldwin faced in his idealised portrait of a masculine homosexuality. Guillaume, Giovanni tells David, "is really not a man at all," but "a disgusting old fairy," who swaddles his bloated body in perfume and silks (GR, 62, 102).¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ See also where David notes that Giovanni's bar "was a promontory and we were the sea" (31).

¹⁶⁰ In his seduction of Giovanni at a cinema, he is compared to Greta Garbo in contrast to Gary Cooper (60).

But if Giovanni and David distinguish themselves from the theatrical effeminacy of Guillaume and his clients, then Baldwin shows the ways in which Giovanni's masculinity is also maintained through repudiation, not just of the feminine, but of the female. Both David and Giovanni, like so many of Baldwin's characters, have not only had women as lovers (Giovanni was married), but are open to the possibility of heterosexual (or bisexual) desire. Giovanni, we learn, does not have a mistress now, but tells David that "perhaps I will again one day" (*GR*, 77). But although Baldwin distinguishes David and Giovanni's homosexuality as masculine, Giovanni's misogyny renders his position problematic. Women, Giovanni tells David, are "treacherous," "shallow," and "dirty:" "these absurd women running around today, full of ideas and nonsense, and thinking themselves equal to men . . . they need to be beaten half to death so that they can find out who rules the world" (*GR*, 77).

Giovanni's negative and violent attitudes towards women problematises Baldwin's idealised portrait of a masculine homosexuality. But David's growing dissatisfaction with his life in "the maid's room," also points, as I have suggested, to the fluidity of sexual roles and boundaries. In what begins as a

relationship that is defined by equality (Giovanni begins by inviting David "to become friends"), quickly turns to one of inequality.

David is at first content to act out a traditionally feminine role whilst living with Giovanni, recalling how "I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work" (GR, 84). Watched over by the Edenic picture of a man and a woman, "hemmed in by roses," David clears out the detritus of Giovanni's room whilst his lover goes to work. But in a moment of revelation that recalls his rejection of Joey ("But Joey is a boy"), David challenges Giovanni, by shouting, "But I'm a man . . . a man! What do you think can *happen* between us?" (GR, 135). Rejecting his role as "wife," David affirms that "men never can be housewives" (GR, 85), which he increasingly views as an unequal relationship: "What kind of life can two men have together, anyway? . . . You want to go out and be the laborer and bring home the money and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean . . . and be your little girl" (GR, 135).

Baldwin's positioning of David as "housewife" must be understood in relation to the complex models of masculinity that competed in the post-war period.

As Robert Corber has convincingly shown, the post-war economic boom led to a shift whereby men were increasingly encouraged not only to identify as consumers, but to take an active part in domestic life. In contrast to the earlier male generation, masculinity in the early and mid 1950s shifted towards what Corber terms "the domestic model of masculinity," or the rise of the "organization man," a term used by cultural historians.¹⁶¹ David's resistance to the domestic, then, also suggests a form of opposition to what Corber and others have argued was the hegemonic model for masculinity. Also implicit in David's performance as "wife" is his role as the penetrated, not the penetrator. Historically, as Robert Aldrich has pointed out, the distinction between *erastes* (dominant partner) and *eremenos* (passive partner) has meant that only the *erastes* "was a true manly citizen."¹⁶² In fact, in Italy, before the use of the word "*omosessuale*"--aside from slang--there were only terms for the passive partner in anal intercourse.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 6.

¹⁶² Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 16, 17.

¹⁶³ Aldrich, 176; he also notes that it was only the passive partners who developed a homosexual subculture; significantly--in relation to *GR*--he also notes that many homosexuals proved their virility not only by being "active," but by fathering a child, like Giovanni; see also Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp

Baldwin's emphasis on David's reluctance to inhabit the traditionally female role points, as I have suggested, to the problems that he encountered in his portrayal of David's masculine homosexuality. On the one hand, Baldwin illustrates David's problematic relationship between his masculinity and his suggested role as a catamite. But on the other hand, Baldwin suggests that David's masculinity, like gay macho, disrupts the ways that homosexuality is read. If the homosexual underworld is, as I have shown, depicted as effeminate, then David's contrasting masculinity inhibits the ways that homosexuality can be easily located. In fact Baldwin's recollection of male lovers who were "cops, football players, soldiers, sailors . . . boxers, construction workers," suggests Baldwin's awareness, not only of the pervasiveness of male desire for men, but an acknowledgement that masculinity need not be incompatible with homosexuality; or as Richard Dyer asks: "[i]f that bearded, muscular drinker turns out to be a pansy, how ever are they going to know the 'real' men any more?"¹⁶⁴

(London & Cambridge, Mass., 1988), where he notes that "to be penetrated is to abdicate power" (212).

¹⁶⁴ Cited by Corber *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 141; Corber is critical of Dyer, Bersani and Dennis Altman. In particular he takes issue with their argument by arguing that gay macho has a much earlier genesis that is generally acknowledged (the 1970s);

By using Dyer's colourful image I want to draw attention to the ways in which Baldwin explores the relationship between gender and sexuality in *Giovanni's Room*. Central to Dyer's reading is the notion that gay macho appropriates a theatrical masculinity that destabilises the hegemonic and "natural" heterosexual masculinity. Although this reading of gay macho is not immediately obvious in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin repeatedly suggests that David's performance of heterosexuality/ masculinity is no less theatrical than the femininity of Guillaume and Jacques. In particular, I explore Baldwin's implicit correlation between racial and sexual passing in his description of David.

The word "passing" "designates a performance in which one is not, a performance commonly imagined along the axis of race, class, gender, or sexuality."¹⁶⁵ Although passing novels in African-American literature traditionally figure a character

in contrast, Corber suggests that adopting a theatrical masculinity was not "an abrupt departure from earlier gay male practices" (143). Corber in turn sees the early gay macho as a form of opposition to the "organisation man" (145). In an interesting parallel to Dyer's work, see Eddie Murphy's *Saturday Night Live* sketch "White Like Me," where he passes as white, concluding: "the next time you're hugging up with some really super groovy white guy . . . don't be too sure . . . they might be black." For a useful discussion of this, see Gayle Ward, *Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 1-24.

¹⁶⁵ Valerie Rohy, "Displacing Desire: Passing, Nostalgia, and *Giovanni's Room*," *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, 219.

who escapes the social threats of racism by appearing as white, passing novels often involve the act of gender disguise. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, Eliza famously disguises herself as a white man to avoid detection.¹⁶⁶ As I illustrated in the second section of this chapter, for some critics, such as Robert Bone, the desire for assimilation was tantamount to a form of passing:

Assimilation is . . . a means of escape, a form of flight from "the Problem." It involves a denial of one's racial identity. . . . Assimilation, viewed as a personal adjustment to being a Negro in America, is a kind of psychological "passing" at the fantasy level (NNA, 4).

Bone's careful use of the word "flight" signals both his disparagement of assimilation and passing, but it also points to the ways in which the word is often used to describe the journey across racial (and sexual) boundaries.¹⁶⁷ In *Giovanni's Room*, David is

¹⁶⁶ See Rohy who also cites the narrative of William and Ellen Craft (1860) who escaped from slavery with Ellen dressed as a white man and William posing as her servant (219). See also Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, ed. & introd. Malcolm Bradbury [1894] (London: Penguin, 1986) where he explores the relationship between racial and gender passing (Tom, for example, dresses up in his mother's clothes to commit robberies, 121).

¹⁶⁷ See Deborah McDowell, "'It's Not Safe. Not Safe at All: ' Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), 616-625. McDowell draws

repeatedly portrayed as presenting himself as he is not: whether it is as heterosexual to Hella, or homosexual to Giovanni.¹⁶⁸ By moving to Paris, David hopes to avoid the self-confrontation that he knows he must face:

I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well--by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion (GR, 24-5).

Although David is aware that his attempts to keep in constant motion are a form of self-deception, Baldwin repeatedly describes his evasion as a form of "flight:"¹⁶⁹

Perhaps, as we say in America, I wanted to find myself. . . . I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self from I which I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home (GR, 25).

attention to the parallels between passing as white and passing as heterosexual.

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, where David describes his engagement to Hella by stating, "I told her that I loved her once and I made myself believe it" (10).

¹⁶⁹ See also 15, 21.

Crucially, Baldwin makes the point that David is aware of his deceit: "I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat to France" (GR, 25). In his justification of time spent with *le milieu*, as Baldwin describes the gay bars, David reasons that "I was intent on proving, to them and myself, that I was not of their company," hoping that he is successfully "above suspicion" (GR, 26).

Baldwin's descriptions of David's attempts to avoid suspicion invoke both the scrutiny of sexual identities so prevalent during the Cold War, and his increasing fear that he will be found out.¹⁷⁰ Concerned that people are taking bets on his sexuality, David is aware of being watched by *le milieu*, "in order to discover, by means of signs I made but which only they could read, whether or not I had a true vocation" (GR, 31). The suggestion of coding here, recalls Fiedler's insistent review that black people must be "encoded" in *Giovanni's Room*, also evoking the scrutiny of Cold War policing that sought to read the increasingly illegible signs of homosexuality.

¹⁷⁰ See Mae Henderson, "James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (2000), where she discusses the novel's emphasis on the specular (esp. 9).

Although he is initially disparaging of Jacques's shrill voice, David is increasingly self-conscious about his demeanour, anxious that his gestures will reveal his "true vocation." The first time that he meets Giovanni, David "felt again, this strange tightening of my chest and wondered at the sound of my voice" (GR, 38). Watchful of his gestures, David is increasingly concerned that he will be found out, mirroring the anxiety of characters in passing novels who fear, as Freud stated, that they will "betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other." As David passes a sailor, Baldwin contrasts David's fear of revelation with the stranger who "wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin" (GR, 88). Caught gazing at the sailor, David is suddenly aware that his desire is legible:

We came abreast and, as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he gave me a look contemptuously lewd and knowing. . . . And in another second, had our contact lasted, I was certain that there would erupt into speech, out of all that light and beauty, some brutal variation of *Look, baby. I know you* (GR, 88).

Like the knowing racial gaze in passing novels that signals recognition, the sailor's sexual gaze pierces

David's disguise, threatening exposure.¹⁷¹ The moment of revelation that fills David with shame shatters his attempts to pass as straight: "I was too old to suppose that it had anything to do with do with my walk, or the way I held my hands, or voice--which, anyway he had not heard. It was something else and I would never see it. I would never dare to see it. It would be like looking at the naked sun" (GR, 89).

The parallels between racial and sexual passing suggest ways in which Baldwin, as Fiedler insisted, may have "encoded" a black character in the novel. More recently, a number of critics have attempted to decode a racialized--and in particular African-American--character in Baldwin's second novel.¹⁷² The references to Joey in *Giovanni's Room* as "quick and dark," "brown" with "dark eyes" and "curly hair," have prompted some critics to argue that Joey's darkness represents the position of a black gay lover (GR, 12, 13, 14). Cora Kaplan, for example, makes the valid point that "initiation into the homoerotic for Baldwin's white American males is often imagined through black lovers," and Joey's position as the

¹⁷¹ See Rohy who makes a similar point, relating it to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of "homosexual panic," in *Between Men* (224).

¹⁷² Interestingly, Baldwin wrote in an (unpublished) letter to Philip Rahv (October 1956) that "one of the major characters in

black gay lover is "suggested" through the references to his darkness.¹⁷³ Other critics, such as Donald H. Mengay and Horace Porter have forcefully argued that Giovanni is in fact "really" African-American. Mengay, for example, insists that Giovanni represents the "black/gay/male position," whilst Horace Porter's elaborate theory suggests that Giovanni is in fact a reincarnation of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas.¹⁷⁴ Whereas many critics, such as Marlon Ross, insist that "[w]ithout the ethnic difference between Giovanni . . . it would be impossible for the novel to script its story of tortured same sex desire," other critics, notably, Myriam Chancy, dismiss "this facile explication of Giovanni's 'otherness.'"¹⁷⁵ Drawing on Joseph Beam's work, Chancy argues that *Giovanni's Room* is in fact a work that renders "an encoded Black gay

my new novel, having presented himself as an Italian, now discloses the fact that he is actually a Jew."

¹⁷³ Cora Kaplan, "'A Cavern Opened in My Mind: The Poetics of Homosexuality and the Politics of Masculinity in James Baldwin,'" *Representing Black Men*, ed. Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 34. See Roger Austen, *Playing the Game: the Homosexual novel in America* (New York & Indianapolis, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1977), where he notes how many homosexual novels have figured a darker male lover (esp. 15).

¹⁷⁴ Donald H. Mengay, "The Failed Copy: *Giovanni's Room* and the (Re) Contextualisation of Difference," *Genders*, 17 (1993): 60. See Horace Porter, *Stealing the Fire: the Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), esp. 141-52.

¹⁷⁵ Chancy, 169.

presence in the novel" through the literal invisibility of a black figure.¹⁷⁶

The disparate theories on whether or not there is a black figure in *Giovanni's Room* (whether literal or symbolic) illustrate Baldwin's ambiguous references to non-white characters in the novel. Giovanni, for example is described as being "on the auction block," and is compared to both a piece of china and racehorse, which suggests an analogy to slaves as chattel (*GR*, 31, 34). But in contrast to the theories that I have outlined above, I want to argue rather that Baldwin deliberately teases the reader, disturbing the purity (and authenticity) of his "white" text through suggestion. By suggesting--but not fully articulating--a black presence in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin draws attention to the imbrication of race and sexuality. As David Savran has pointed out in his reading of Tennessee Williams's film, *Baby Doll* (also 1956), by employing a Sicilian protagonist (Silva Vicarro) and a "seduction scene" between a dark "seducer" and his blond "victim," Williams fuelled a contemporary "pathological fear of miscegenation."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Chancy, 180.

¹⁷⁷ David Savran, *Communist Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (London & Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1992), 129.

In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin draws attention to the relationship between homophobia and racism through his phobic language of dirt, shit and filth. Though Giovanni is not "black," Baldwin illustrates how his exotic foreignness contributes to his allure in the homosexual subculture. By stressing Giovanni's peasant Italian heritage, and by showing his economic dependency on Guillaume (who is from one of the oldest families in France), Baldwin suggestively illustrates the parallels between sexual and economic vulnerability.¹⁷⁸

But I also want to suggest that Baldwin's narrative further explores and critiques the ways in which racial and sexual identities are formed and controlled. At the start of the novel, David defines his whiteness directly through the non-white:

My reflection is tall, perhaps rather
like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. . .
. My ancestors conquered a continent,
pushing across death-laden plains. . . .
(GR, 9).

By identifying David's reflection with his imperial ancestors, Baldwin draws attention to the ways in

¹⁷⁸ See Baldwin's "No Name on the Street," *Price*, where he describes being groped by one of the most powerful men in the southern state where he was visiting. Baldwin writes "as my

which the colonial identity, like heterosexuality, defines its boundaries through repudiating the colonised or homosexual.¹⁷⁹ Though we learn nothing more about David's physical characteristics, both Joey and Giovanni are described as "quick and dark," and "dark and leonine" (GR, 12, 31). As Myriam Chancy has pointed out, "Baldwin's placement of David in the role of 'white conqueror' operates as a metaphor in the novel for privilege, a privilege which is maintained through David's 'othering' of both male lovers in order to preserve . . . his white, heterosexual identity."¹⁸⁰

As David's identity as heterosexual is gradually questioned through the novel, Baldwin quietly suggests the ways in which David's claim of racial purity (his blond identity as conqueror) is also disturbed. Baldwin illustrates this by framing the beginning and end of the novel with David examining his reflection. In contrast to the "gleaming" face that looks back at the start of the novel, David's reflection becomes darker, until it threatens to fade away (GR, 57, 157).

identity was defined by his power, so was my humanity to be placed at the service of his fantasies" (481).

¹⁷⁹ See Chancy, who convincingly theorises this through Homi K. Bhabha's theory of "the analytic of desire." Bhabha's theory explores the ways in which identity is formed "whereby individuals apprehend their own identities through differentiation from a body they have 'othered'" (180).

¹⁸⁰ Chancy, 182.

Baldwin's reference to David's darkening reflection is strongly reminiscent of St. Paul's well-known phrase from the first letter to Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass, darkly," a fact suggested by Baldwin's use of Corinthians at the end of the novel.¹⁸¹

Importantly, St. Paul's famous phrase was also used by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, who, in a much cited passage, writes: "In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,--darkly as through a veil."¹⁸² For Du Bois, the use of St. Paul showed, among other things, how, as Henry Louis Gates and Terri Oliver have argued:

that the African-American's attempt to gain self-consciousness in a racist society will always be impaired because any reflected image coming from the gaze of white America is necessarily a distorted one, and quite probably a harmful one as well.¹⁸³

In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's use of Du Bois/ St. Paul suggests his criticism of the ways in which the

¹⁸¹ See 1 Corinthians 13: 12; David also cites from 1 Corinthians 14: 2 "[w]hen I was a child, I spake as a child" (158).

¹⁸² Du Bois, 14.

¹⁸³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Oliver, "Preface," *The Souls of the Black Folk*, xxv-xxvi.

contingency of both racial and sexual identities are denied, recalling his statement that his identity could not be defined solely in terms of his sexuality; the gay hall of mirrors, "threw back only brief and distorted fragments of myself."

Conclusion

In both my first chapter and the beginning of this chapter, I illustrated the ways in which Baldwin's work critiques the rigidity of both sexual and racial boundaries. By locating *Giovanni's Room* in a cultural climate that saw an increasing concern with racial and sexual identities, I have argued that Baldwin's portrayal of David and Giovanni question and disrupt prevailing ideas that both race and sexuality can be fixed and identifiable.

To conclude this chapter I return to the image of the cavern in order to suggest further ways in which this image anticipates Baldwin's developing theories about boundaries, which in turn feed into his mercurial views on identity politics. As an image which suggests both obliteration and the unknown, the cavern highlights David's concerns that he cannot fix his sexual identity. In contrast to his search for a mooring post--suggested by his desperate attempts to

authorise his heterosexual masculinity by sleeping with Sue--the cavern is terrifying precisely because it is unknown.

In *Giovanni's Room*, David's most vivid experience of the "cavern," occurs after his love-making with Joey. Yet, at precisely the moment when David fears that his manhood will be subsumed, that he will lose his anchor, his ability to define himself, he glimpses the possibility of salvation: "I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me."¹⁸⁴

Baldwin's image of the cavern as a possible site of regeneration or redemption strongly evokes Du Bois's well-known examination of emerging African-American consciousness. In contrast to the cavern, Du Bois describes the veil, but like the cavern it functions as site both of negation and of possible spiritual regeneration. Even as Du Bois's character sees himself "darkly as through a veil," Du Bois explicitly points to the possibility of spiritual power: "and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission."¹⁸⁵ In Du

¹⁸⁴ See Kaplan who reads the cavern as a site of the abject, citing Elizabeth Gross, who, in her work on the abject, writes of how "[t]his abyss is the locus of the subject's generation and the place of its potential obliteration," which corresponds to the dual images of negation and re-birth (39).

¹⁸⁵ Du Bois, 14.

Bois's essay, the African-American subject struggles, like David in *Giovanni's Room*, to find himself: "[h]e began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another."¹⁸⁶ By constructing African-American subjectivity through a struggle of opposing forces (African and American), Du Bois's essay suggests ways in which Baldwin explores the tension between not only black and white, but gay and straight, male and female.

Baldwin's muted reference to salvation through a site or process that obliterates boundaries implicitly suggests that David's redemption can be found only when he has reached a state in which identities, whether gay or straight have been dismantled. And throughout *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin makes explicit references both to Giovanni's damnation, and David's responsibility to redeem him through love. Giovanni has spit on the cross, believing that God has punished him, further illustrated by David's image of his lover rotting in "unhallowed ground" (GR, 133, 44). Aware of his role, David acknowledges his power to redeem Giovanni: "[t]he burden of his [Giovanni's] salvation seemed to be on me and I could not endure it" (GR, 109-10).

¹⁸⁶ Du Bois, 14.

David's inability to redeem Giovanni through his body anticipates my last chapter where I examine Baldwin's insistence on the need for sexual as well as spiritual love. In *Giovanni's Room*, David's repeated insistence on innocence is explicitly shown by Baldwin to be an obstacle, not just to Giovanni's redemption, but to David's ability to grow and change. "You love your purity," Giovanni tells David, and it is his separation of the body and the spirit, his refusal to see the body as anything but dirty, that characterises his inability to love Giovanni (*GR*, 133).

And yet, if the cavern functions as a site of possible redemption where David's distinctions between gay and straight, body and flesh disintegrate, then, as my next chapter shows, this image remains problematic. In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's demarcation of boundaries is complicated by the image of the transvestite, a figure who blurs the distinctions between masculine and feminine, salvation and damnation:

It looked like a mummy or a zombie--this was the first time, overwhelming impression--of something walking after it had been put to death. . . . It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a horrifying lasciviousness. It seemed to make no

sound; this was due to the roaring of the bar, which was like the roaring of the sea. . . . It glittered in the dim light; the thin black hair was violent with oil, combed forward, hanging in bangs; the eyelids gleamed with mascara, the mouth raged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless. . . . The shirt, open coquettishly to the navel, revealed a hairless chest and a silver crucifix . . . and made one feel that the mummy might, at any moment, disappear in flame (GR, 41).

In Baldwin's description of the transvestite, the figure is terrifying because s/he cannot be located. The transvestite is at once neither wholly female nor male, emphasised by Baldwin's repeated reference to the figure as "it." And yet Baldwin draws attention to the ways in which the transvestite evinces an excessive performance of femininity--the violent makeup--which is strongly evocative of David's fears of hyperbolic and dangerous femininity, a point further made by Baldwin's pun on "mummy."

For David, the transvestite is both mesmerising and repulsive. Like Jim Willard in *The City and the Pillar* who expresses his disgust at "strange womanish creatures," David is troubled by his recognition of what he sees as an inharmonious blend of male and

female characteristics: "I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of them" (GR, 30; first emphasis mine).¹⁸⁷

Given that *Giovanni's Room* problematises the very notion of "real," David's comment seems at first to serve as an ironic rejoinder to his inability to find himself. And yet, the transvestite is also a literal (dis) embodiment of Baldwin's earlier warning that the homosexual underworld is a place where one "never meets either men or women . . . where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased." In *Giovanni's Room*, the transvestite is neither wholly male nor female, neither alive nor truly dead. Divested of humanity, s/he is beyond redemption since there is no possibility of human involvement.

Baldwin's earlier essay on the homosexual underworld, "The Male Prison," serves to highlight and problematise a reading of the cavern as an ideal: a site that transcends and transforms identity categories. In both "The Male Prison" and in his

¹⁸⁷ Vidal, 65; see also Ronald Shaw's statement, "if a man likes men, he wants a man, and if he likes women, he wants a woman, so who wants a freak who's neither?" (68).

description of the transvestite, Baldwin suggests that the dismantling of boundaries and identity categories do not necessarily lead to transformation or redemption. As I examine in the following chapter, contrary to a number of critics who see in Baldwin's writing an attempt to transcend identities--whether racial or sexual--his work offers no such readily applicable or comforting strategy.

CHAPTER THREE

"Race," Illegibility and Chaos in Another Country

It was a negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of blackness

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'" And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black."

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is black? First of all, what's his colour?

Jean Genet, *The Blacks*

By 1961, according to James Campbell, Baldwin "was entering the big time."¹ He had recently flown to Stockholm to interview the director Ingmar Bergman, followed by a trip to the South shadowing Martin Luther King. With a salary of some \$20,000 in 1961, Baldwin had begun to obtain the success that he had craved. Never one careful with money, Baldwin's love of whisky, late night parties and growing entourage left the writer with little money and no productive space to write. "I am what you'd call a drinking man," Baldwin told one *Ebony* reporter in 1961 (TG, 143). Help came in the form of a fellow novelist, William Styron, who invited Baldwin to stay with him in Connecticut, far removed from the tempting but now stultifying metropolis. History clearly did not impinge on the friendship of the two novelists: one, the Southern grandson of a slave-owner, the other the grandchild of a slave. In fact the period spent in Styron's guesthouse--from early February until July 4th 1961--proved remarkably productive for both authors, as Baldwin's secretary and biographer, David Leeming recalls:

¹ James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991), 143; hereafter abbreviated as TG.

Meeting for lunch and dinner, Styron and Baldwin would discuss their work.

Baldwin read aloud from *Another Country*, and Styron from *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.²

Leeming's account of this genteel and creative arrangement stands in sharp and bitter contrast to the splenetic criticism that greeted both *Another Country* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Baldwin's novel, first published in 1962, was, according to Stanley Edgar Hyman in the *New Leader* "degrading . . . pornography" (TG, 157), whilst Styron's novel (published in 1967), "touched and stirred the black intellectual community," like "no event in recent years."³ Baldwin's presence at the gestation of such a polemical novel as *Confessions* is remarkable in itself. Still more remarkable, as I briefly outline, is Baldwin's controversial support of *Confessions*, a novel that Styron claimed he would not have had the courage to publish without Baldwin's support and encouragement.⁴

² David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 185.

³ John Henrik Clarke, "Introduction," *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), vii.

⁴ See William Styron, "Jimmy in the House," *James Baldwin: A Legacy*, ed. Quincy Troupe (New York & London: Simon & Shuster/Touchstone, 1989), 45.

In a lengthy article for *Harper's* magazine in 1965, William Styron explained how Nat Turner had "obsessed" his imagination.⁵ Chronicling the account of the 1831 slave insurrection, Styron spoke of how Turner had become "erased from memory," a mere footnote in the amnesia of Southern history.⁶ In his introduction to the novel, Styron insisted that he had "rarely departed from the *known* facts about Nat Turner," defining his novel as "less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history" (first emphasis mine).⁷

The most sustained response to Styron, collected in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), argued that Styron's portrayal of the 1831 slave insurrection, far from being "a meditation on history," deliberately distorted "the true character of Nat Turner."⁸ Styron's Turner, Lerone Bennett, Jr. emphatically insisted, "is not only the antithesis of Nat Turner; he is the antithesis of blackness . . . a neurasthenic, Hamlet-like white

⁵ William Styron, "This Quiet Dust," *Harper's* 230 (April 1965): 145.

⁶ Styron, "This Quiet Dust:" 145.

⁷ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* [1967] (London: Picador, 1994), ix.

⁸ Clarke, viii. Styron's novel is still lambasted; for a recent article that continues to search for the "real" Turner, see Molefir Kete Asante, "The Real Nat Turner," *Emerge: Black America's Newsmagazine* (March 2000): 52-55.

intellectual in black face."⁹ Whereas much of the criticism vehemently challenged the ability of "a white southern gentleman to tune in on the impulses, beliefs, emotions, and thought-patterns of a black slave," Baldwin stood apart from the majority of leading black intellectuals.¹⁰ Side-stepping the question of whether he *could*, Baldwin spoke admiringly of how Styron "had to put himself in the skin of Nat Turner," in order to "deal with something that was tormenting him and frightening him."¹¹ Thirteen years later in his introduction to Michael Thelwell's account of the civil rights struggle, Baldwin remained steadfast to his earlier views:

I do not at all regret the position I took concerning Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* nor has my position changed. My position was, and is (a) I am not about to tell another writer how and what to write. . . . And (b), if you

⁹ Lerone Bennett, Jr., "Nat's Last White Man," *William Styron's Nat Turner*, 5.

¹⁰ Michael Thelwell, "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner," *William Styron's Nat Turner*, 80. The historian John Hope Franklin also supported Turner; see William Styron, "Jimmy in the House," *James Baldwin: A Legacy*, 46.

¹¹ Julius Lester, "James Baldwin--Reflections of a Maverick," *Conversations with Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 229.

don't like Styron's *Nat Turner*, write yours.¹²

On one level, Baldwin's support of Styron comes as little surprise. Aside from their friendship, Baldwin's choice of a white narrator in *Giovanni's Room* illustrated his conviction that an author could "put himself in the skin" of a character, whether black or white. But on a more profound level, Baldwin's contrasting views with Bennett and others, articulated in the heat of the Black Arts Movement, raise fundamental questions that have continued to circulate in contemporary African-American studies.¹³ What does Bennett mean by "the antithesis of blackness?" What, indeed, does Bennett mean by "blackness?" Does he mean heredity, experience, pigmentation, culture, history or language?

The historical juxtapositioning of both *Another Country* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* offers a useful insight into how the former novel might be usefully approached; a novel that explores, to cite from two of Baldwin's essays, both how "the words

¹² James Baldwin, "Introduction," *Duties, Pleasures and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle*, by Michael Thelwell (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), xxi.

¹³ See, for example, Addison Gayle, Jr. *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1975) who writes that "[t]o evaluate the life and culture of black people, it is necessary that one live the black experience . . ." (xi).

'white' and 'black' don't mean anything," yet at the same time is a work that emphasises that "[c]olor, for anyone who uses it, or is used by it, is a most complex, calculated and dangerous phenomenon."¹⁴ The question raised implicitly by Bennett--what constitutes blackness--is, I argue, a central dialectic in Baldwin's third novel, a question that lies at the root of Baldwin's depictions of black-white relations.

This chapter foregrounds Baldwin's exploration of black-white relations in *Another Country* by examining his attempts to define "blackness" through his non-fiction. To borrow from Frantz Fanon's disarmingly simple question posed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Baldwin's third novel asks: "[c]an the white man behave healthily toward the black man and can the black man behave healthily toward the white man?"¹⁵ Beginning with an account of the infamous *New Literary History* debate between Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Joyce A. Joyce, this chapter places Baldwin's definitions of race within ongoing essentialist and

¹⁴ James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, foreword by Ida Lewis, afterword by Orde Coombs (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), 45; hereafter abbreviated as *D*; James Baldwin, "Color," *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* [1962] (New York: St. Martin's/ Marek, 1985), 322; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Price*.

constructionist arguments. Despite Adam Lively's claim that Baldwin "never--even at his most angry and rhetorically extreme--flirted with biological or essentialist definitions of 'blackness,'" and Craig Werner's conclusion that "Baldwin knew . . . that race is not an essence," I argue that Baldwin's views on race are mercurial, contradictory, governed by the political exigencies of the time.¹⁶ "I don't know what race means," Baldwin stated in 1964, and, as I argue, *Another Country* shifts uneasily between repudiating identity categories, and suggesting the impossibility of transcending them.¹⁷

1. B(1)ack to Basics: the Blackness of Blackness

W.E.D Du Bois's prescient statement in 1903, that "[t]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line . . .," arguably remains true.¹⁸ In

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann [1952] (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 169; hereafter abbreviated *BS*, *WM*.

¹⁶ Adam Lively, *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (London: Vintage, 1999), 257; Craig Werner, "James Baldwin: Politics and the Gospel Impulse," *Politics* 2, no. 2 (1989): 116; see also Melvin Dixon, "This Light, This Fire, This Time," *Out/Look* 2, no. 2 (fall 1989) who claims that Baldwin "considered black and white, categories he regards as social constructs rather than fixed biological entities" (39).

¹⁷ James Baldwin, "The Use of the Blues," *Playboy* (January 1964): 132.

¹⁸ W.E.D. Du Bois, *The Souls of the Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver [1903] (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 17.

the late twentieth century, however, the problem has shifted towards the difficulty, not just of the color-line, but on how to represent blackness. More recently, this problem has been succinctly outlined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who points out that the African-American canon was precipitated as a direct response to Enlightenment claims that people of African descent could not write.¹⁹ In particular, Kant's elaboration of Hume's essay, "Of National Characters," (1748) located blackness as a synonym for stupidity, a theory later developed by Hegel, who argued that, since Africans could not write, they did not have a history.²⁰

The problem for contemporary critics, as Gates outlines, is how to represent "blackness"--which has been historically characterised as "absence"--as visible; yet, at the same time, to avoid, in Gates's words, depicting "blackness" as "a natural, transcendent signified," what Victor Anderson terms

¹⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 25.

²⁰ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Writing, 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," "Race," *Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1-20. For a useful overview of Enlightenment claims about the Africans' supposed lack of reason, see Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), esp. ch. 2, 51-85.

"ontological blackness."²¹ As Gates writes elsewhere, in contrast to theorists of the Black Arts Movement, the challenge "is no longer to posit blackness . . . but to render it."²²

Few incidents in recent years have illustrated this problem of representing blackness more acutely than the now famous *New Literary History* debate between African-American critics; a debate that began in 1987, the year of Baldwin's death, precipitated by a reading of Baldwin's essay, "On Being 'White' . . . and Other Lies." Baldwin's brief essay argues that not only is there "no white community," but America became "white" by denying or effacing "blackness." In fact Baldwin goes as far to argue that "there are no white people."²³ For Joyce A. Joyce, Baldwin's essay is too obscure, signalling an abdication of what she maintains is the writer's responsibility to her/ his audience. Foregrounding bell hooks's complaint that postmodernism "still directs its critical voice to a specialized audience," Joyce complained that "Black

²¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), 315; Anderson, 11.

²² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 147; for an earlier discussion of how race is a "scientific construct," see Calvin C. Hernton, *Sex and Racism* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1965), 146-7.

²³ James Baldwin, "On Being 'White' . . . and Other Lies," *Essence* 14 (April 1984): 90, 92.

poststructuralist critics have adopted a linguistic system . . . that communicate[s] to a small, isolated audience."²⁴ Singling out Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Joyce denounces what she vaguely terms the "poststructuralist sensibility," insisting that Gates has endorsed a "denial of blackness or race as an important element of literary analysis of Black literature:"

It is insidious for the Black literary critic to adopt any kind of strategy that diminishes or in this case--through an allusion to binary oppositions--negates his blackness. It is not a fortuitous occurrence that Black creative writers for nearly two-hundred years have consistently addressed the ramifications of slavery and racism.²⁵

Joyce's virulent critique of Gates's work is tempered by bell hooks's insightful but more cautionary warning about the application of post-modern theories within the African-American academy. Noting that few African-Americanists have endorsed postmodernism, hooks advocates a healthy suspicion "of post-modern critiques of the 'subject' when they

²⁴ Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 18 (winter 1987): 339; bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 23.

surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time," a point echoed by Gates who states that "precisely when we . . . obtain the complex wherewithal to define our black subjectivity . . . our theoretical colleagues declare that there ain't no such thing as a subject . . ." ²⁶

The accusations levelled at Gates bear a striking resemblance to Eldridge Cleaver's equally notorious attack of Baldwin in *Soul on Ice* (1968). Cleaver's dislike of Baldwin, we learn, came after the publication of *Another Country*. Before then, in a curiously sexual rhetoric, Cleaver recalls how he "lusted for anything that Baldwin had written." ²⁷ Cleaver's virulent homophobia cannot be extricated from his dismissal of Baldwin's subsequent work, yet the key to Cleaver's polemic is contained and guarded by its parenthetical claimer:

(And, like it or not, a black man,
unless he has become irretrievably

²⁵ Joyce: 378, 337, 341.

²⁶ hooks, 28; Gates, *Loose Canons*, 36. For a pertinent example of this problematic moment, see Fanon who talks about how his hope in Negritude was quashed by Sartre's insistence that it was "a transition and not a conclusion" (133). For the original Sartre essay, see Jean-Paul Sartre, "Black Orpheus," *What is Literature? and Other Essays*, trans. John MacCombie, introd. Steven Ungar [1948] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. 326-7.

²⁷ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, introd. Maxwell Geismar (New York, Toronto & Sydney: Ramparts, 1968), 97; hereafter abbreviated as *SOI*.

"white-minded," responds with an additional dimension of his being to the articulated experience of another black--in spite of the universality of human experience) (*SOI*, 97).

Cleaver's position is clear, albeit unsubstantiated. Unless an African-American is "white-minded," he/ she responds with "an additional dimension of his being." Although he lays claim to the "universality of human experience," it becomes clear that Cleaver is suggesting that this additional dimension is something only communicable from one African-American to another.

In his virulent attack on Baldwin, which foreshadows Joyce's critique of Gates, Cleaver makes it clear that he believes that the author of *Another Country* has somehow negated his black identity. Baldwin, according to Cleaver, has not only become "a reluctant black," but also "a white man in a black body" (*SOI*, 99, 102). In Baldwin's writing, Cleaver continues, we find a "total hatred of the blacks;" subsumed by the cancerous white disease of homosexuality:

he focuses on "whiteness" all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor blade of hatred against "blackness"-- upon himself, what he is, and all those

who like him, remind him of himself. He may even hate the darkness of the night (SOI, 103).

If both Baldwin and Gates stand accused of effacing or negating "blackness," then what, it must be asked, is "blackness?" For Gates in particular, the question is less one of ontogeny (what is blackness), but how blackness functions in language as the most arbitrary of metaphors: "'Blackness' is not a material object or an event but a trope; it does not have an 'essence' as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity."²⁸ Similarly, if more simply, Baldwin writes of how "[t]his is one of the reasons I try to make clear that the words 'white' and 'black' don't mean anything" (D, 45).

The criticism levelled at both Gates and Baldwin feeds into large debates that have continued to circle in essentialist/ constructionist arguments. Although Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote wearily in *Epistemology of the Closet*, that "every gay-orientated book written in the late 1980s engages with the essentialist/ constructionist debate," Sedgwick's call that her study might be the last one "to demur vigorously from

²⁸ Gates, *Figures in Black*, 40.

such a task," must be read in the context of her project.

Notwithstanding Sedgwick's claim that essentialist/ constructionist debates have reached a "conceptual deadlock" in the field(s) of gender, sex and sexuality, her claims bear less relevance to the ongoing deliberations about race.²⁹ In particular, Diana Fuss has insightfully warned against engaging in essentialist/ constructionist debates over race from a contemporary viewpoint. Rather, Fuss urges a consideration of essentialism/ constructionism to be viewed through the specificity of the cultural and historical axes that produced them; taking into account the ways in which ideologies are formed, reformed and evolve. Thus, for example, although contemporary critics such as Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have written dismissively of "race" as determined by biological evidence, this must be viewed in context.³⁰ When Frantz Fanon was writing *Black Skins, White Masks*, scientists were still researching a white serum to lighten darker

²⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Penguin, 1990), 40.

³⁰ See, for example, Henry Louis Gates, "Race," *Writing and Difference*, 4; also Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," "Race," *Writing and Difference*, esp. 21-2.

pigmentation (*BS, WM*, 111).³¹ What Fuss usefully proffers is a reminder that "racial categories are politically shaped," an urge to avoid the impasse of earlier essentialist/ constructionist debates by remembering that "the very meaning of the term 'race' has shifted over time and across culture."³²

Fuss's insightful chapter on race offers a useful way of reading Baldwin's views on black-white relations, particularly as she emphasises the importance of locating his views within the political and cultural climate; a crucial consideration when reading Cleaver's accusation that Baldwin attempted to "efface" his blackness. Although, as I later illustrate, Baldwin generally views "race" and "blackness" as social constructs, he cannot simply be bracketed as a "constructionist." Although Baldwin is critical of "blackness" as absence or presence, he attempts to define, to paraphrase Ralph Ellison's sermon in *Invisible Man*, what the "blackness of blackness" means. In other words, the problems of defining what "black" signifies, without resorting to "essential" definitions.

³¹ See also Lawrence Lasker, "A White Shade of Black," *Esquire* 70, no. 1 (July 1968): 62-5. The article discusses an ointment that has turned 55 African-Americans white.

2. Baldwin's Views on Blackness

In his dismissive critique of Baldwin's work and racial views, Cleaver focuses on two of Baldwin's essays, "Princes and Powers," and "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy." "Princes and Powers," records Baldwin's coverage of the Conference of Black Writers and Artists who gathered in Paris on September 1956. The conference, which included such luminaries as Leopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Richard Wright and Alioune Diop, was an attempt to consolidate unity amongst all peoples of African descent. A unity that Baldwin's reportage casts doubt on from the onset as he focuses on the cultural differences between Africa and black America. Intrigued by the "arresting costume," and the "extremely strange language" (Yoruban) of one Nigerian speaker, it is clear that Baldwin sees little in common with his African confreres.³³ Divided by geography, language, culture and different traditions, "what," Baldwin asks, "beyond the fact that all black men at one time or another left Africa, or have remained there, do they really have in common?" ("PP," 35).

³² Fuss, 73, 92.

In an interview published in 1964, Baldwin again returned to the theme of cultural diversity. Noting that he first heard of Negritude six or seven years earlier, Baldwin not only stated that he "profoundly distrust[ed] it," but again argued that "oppressions do not necessarily unify so many millions of people all over the world:"³⁴

Well, how in the world is this going to connect to so many different experiences? To be born in Jamaica, Barbados, or Portugal, or New York, or to be black, wouldn't seem to me to be enough . . . and the situation of the man in Jamaica is not the situation of the man in Harlem at all.³⁵

In "Princes and Powers," Baldwin repeatedly expresses his inability to engage with Senghor's claims of an African sensibility. Whilst he is intrigued by Senghor's theories on the African continuum between art and life, Baldwin cannot relate to this viewpoint. Crucially (and this is a point I will return to),

³³ James Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* [1960] (London: Penguin, 1991), 30, 31; hereafter abbreviated as "PP."

³⁴ François Bondy, "James Baldwin, as Interviewed by François Bondy," *Transition* 0, no. 12 (January-February 1964): 16.

³⁵ Bondy: 16; see also Ernest Champion, *Mr. Baldwin I Presume: James Baldwin--Chinua Achebe: A Meetings of Minds* (New York & London: University Press of America, inc., 1995). Champion recalls how Baldwin reprimanded an African-American student for saying "we Africans" (47-8).

Baldwin feels that Senghor's sensibility has come to him "translated," just as he could not understand the Yoruban poetry.

For the West African writer, Bhely-Quenum, "Princes and Powers," was evidence that Baldwin "remained aloof and 'impervious' to issues concerning Africans."³⁶ For Cleaver, Baldwin's reactions to the conference was evidence of his "antipathy toward the black race," a sign of "the revulsion which Baldwin felt for the blacks at this conference, who were glorifying in their blackness" (SOI, 99). Cleaver's attack on Baldwin bears striking parallels to the criticism levelled at Wole Soyinka. Soyinka's infamous remark at the Kampala Writer's Conference in 1962-- that "I don't think a tiger has to go around proclaiming his tigritude"--led some detractors to accuse the Nigerian writer of being both "un-African as a writer," and of being guilty of "blancophilia."³⁷

A closer examination of "Princes and Powers" in fact evinces, not "revulsion," but a measured intellectual response. Baldwin states that all black people *did* have something in common: "their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the

³⁶ Cited by Rosa Bobia, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin in France* (New York & Washington, etc.: Peter Lang, 1997), 23.

white world" ("PP," 35). Again, the word "unutterable," like "translated," emphasises Baldwin's sense of cultural remove from Africa, a belief that Baldwin had earlier articulated in *Notes of a Native Son*, where he again reiterates the impasse of language:

They face each other, the Negro and the African, over a gulf of three thousand years--an alienation too vast to be conquered in an evening's goodwill, too heavy and too double-edged ever to be trapped in speech. This alienation causes the Negro to recognise that he is a hybrid.³⁸

Baldwin parallels LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), who, whilst acknowledging that "Africanisms do exist in Negro culture," emphasises that African cultural traits have become "translated and transmuted by the American experience."³⁹ In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin reinforces this cultural difference through Julia, who concludes that a black American woman in Africa is "a very strange creature" both for herself and for the

³⁷ Cited by Willfried F. Feuser, "Wole Soyinka: The Problem of Authenticity," *Black American Literature Forum* 22, no. 3 (autumn 1988): 557, 555.

³⁸ James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," *Notes of a Native Son* [1950] (London: Penguin, 1995), 118; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Notes*.

³⁹ LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays* [1966] (New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1998), 111; hereafter abbreviated as *H*.

locals.⁴⁰ For Baldwin, the meeting with the African forces the African-American to acknowledge that he is a hybrid between Africa and the West, what Baldwin earlier refers to as being "a kind of bastard of the West."⁴¹

But if Baldwin emphasises the cultural and linguistic distance between Africans and African-Americans, then he also refuses to homogenise experience amongst black Americans. Here, Fuss's imperative to view Baldwin's position from within the political and cultural climate is crucial. For Baldwin becomes caught between a critique of essence (such as Cleaver's claim of superior black masculinity), and what Paul Smith refers to as essentialism's "discourse of resistance."⁴²

Baldwin's resistance to Negritude is illustrated by his reluctance to homogenise collective experience. In a short essay titled "Color," published a year before *Another Country*, Baldwin writes of how:

The comparison between the relative spontaneity and freedom of whites and blacks is falsely stated. There are some relatively free and spontaneous white people, not very many; and some

⁴⁰ James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* [1979] (London: Penguin, 1994), 564.

⁴¹ James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes*, 14.

relatively free and spontaneous Negroes,
not, in my experience, very many more.⁴³

Although he ends with a brief quantifier "(not . . . very many more)," Baldwin is keen to dismiss a notion of black essence, particularly when such essentialism reinforces sexual stereotypes, a point forcefully illustrated by his essay, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy."

In "The Black Boy," first published in 1961, Baldwin criticises what he sees as Mailer's refusal in his essay "The White Negro" to relinquish myths of black sexuality. In contrast to Cleaver, who writes of Mailer's essay as "one of the few gravely important expressions of our time," Baldwin insists that Mailer contributes to the myth of the African-American as "a kind of walking phallic symbol" (*SOI*, 98).⁴⁴

Fifty years on, Mailer's depiction of African-Americans as "relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body," seems crude in its reliance on trans-historical stereotypes.⁴⁵ But Cleaver's endorsement of Mailer's libidinous, rhythmic Negro raises a further

⁴² Cited by Fuss, xii.

⁴³ Baldwin, "Color," *Price*, 322.

⁴⁴ James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," [1961] *Nobody Knows My Name*, 178; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Nobody Knows*.

complication. As Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien have pointed out, oppression can and does lead to a form of resistance that embodies, even accentuates the dominant order's definitions. Thus Cleaver "contest[s] the conditions of dependency and powerlessness which racism and racial oppression enforce," by fulfilling the projected stereotype of the black rapist.⁴⁶

Cleaver's emphasis on aggressive masculinity (a point that I discussed in the first chapter) further problematises Baldwin's precarious position as a homosexual writer. If, as I have shown, Cleaver views Baldwin as an "inauthentic" African-American on account of his sexuality, then his emphasis on black subjectivity, as bell hooks has cogently argued, needs further examination. hooks stresses that oppression operates on different levels, calling for an examination of how, for example, "class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives." "Such a critique," hooks continues, "allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black

⁴⁵ Norman Mailer, *The White Negro* (1957; reprint, San Francisco: City Lights, 1970), 5.

⁴⁶ Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier," *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (1988; reprint, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 118.

experiences."⁴⁷ The dangers, hooks warns, of essentialising black experience is to define "blackness" through master narratives, so that "the black experience," as Cleaver's diatribe reveals, is articulated through the dominant narratives of patriarchy and heterosexism. Rather than admit the diversity of the black experience (whether it is straight, homosexual or bisexual), Cleaver negates Baldwin's black identity, expelling him from the demarcated boundaries of black subjectivity/ authenticity that he has delineated.

If Baldwin is, as we have seen, critical of a universalising black experience, how does he theorise race? To borrow Fuss's useful set of questions:

Is "race" a question of morphology, of anatomical or genetic characteristics . . . If "race" is not a biological feature, then what kind of attribute or category is it: psychological, historical, anthropological, sociological, legal? . . . Is race a matter of birth? of culture? both? neither?⁴⁸

Baldwin's strategy is to de-essentialise white and black by repeatedly emphasising both the

⁴⁷ hooks, 28.

⁴⁸ Fuss, 73.

meaninglessness of each category, and by emphasising the physical and metaphysical links between the two. To be "coloured," Baldwin states, is to be caught in an absurd trap. "Absurd" because "it's not anything that you have done or not done, but by some arbitrary sentence:" (D, 49)

At bottom, to be colored means that one has been caught in some utterly unbelievable cosmic joke, a joke so hideous and in such bad taste that it defeats all categories and definitions.⁴⁹

Unlike Cleaver, who fetishises blackness, Baldwin repeatedly stresses that neither blackness nor whiteness mean anything outside of the white world's definitions. "It is no longer important to be white . . . and it is to be devoutly hoped that it will soon no longer be important to be black."⁵⁰ Whilst Baldwin incessantly describes the effects of race, he maintains that it only has meaning within a legal and political realm: "Colour is not a human or a personal reality; it is a political reality."⁵¹

Rather than hierarchising blackness or whiteness, Baldwin emphasises the inextricability of the two, so

⁴⁹ Baldwin, "Color," *Price*, 319.

⁵⁰ Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," *Nobody Knows*, 175.

⁵¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* [1963] (London: Penguin, 1964), 88; hereafter abbreviated as *FNT*.

that the American concern is not the "black problem" but the black-white problem: "It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."⁵² Baldwin implicitly tropes on Du Bois's famous question, "[h]ow does it feel to be a problem?," a question that Du Bois asks on behalf of black Americans. By insisting that whiteness cannot be extrapolated from blackness, Baldwin's question becomes one of mutual concern: "Our dehumanisation of the Negro then is indivisible from the dehumanisation of ourselves: the loss of our identity is the price we pay for the annulment of his;" and again, "[t]he question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide the graver questions of the self. That is precisely why what we like to call 'the Negro problem' is so tenacious in American life, and so dangerous."⁵³

Black-white relations, for Baldwin, cannot be usefully viewed as a hierarchy, since they are too intimately connected: "It is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor," writes

⁵² Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Notes*, 165.

⁵³ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," *Notes*, 30; "Introduction," *Nobody Knows*, 12.

Baldwin, or "of master to slave; . . . it is also, literally and morally, a blood relationship."⁵⁴ Troping on the image of bondage, Baldwin insists that black and white are now yoked together: "Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together for ever. We are a part of each other."⁵⁵ Not only is there no choice in the matter, but Baldwin questions the very division of "black" and "white" by highlighting the historical mingling of blood, undermining the notion of a pure--whether white or black--racial past.

In the conclusion of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin specifically refers to the black-white relationship as that of "lovers," relentlessly confronting America's history of interracial relationships (*FNT*, 89). Baldwin's insistence on the hybridity of the African-American and white experience is crucial to an understanding of his racial politics. This, in part, explains his reluctance to embrace Negritude, as Baldwin's questions illustrate: "What had this colonial experience made of them and what were they now to do with it? For they were all, now, whether they liked it or not, related to Europe, stained by European visions and standards . . ." ("PP," 41).

⁵⁴ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," *Notes*, 45.

Baldwin's emphasis on the inextricability of white and black points back to Nat Turner's 1831 confession, where the central hermeneutic problem is one of decoding and legibility. Turner's confession, dictated to and composed by his white lawyer, Thomas Gray, poses the problem of locating Turner's voice in Gray's rhetoric. Or, how, in Eric Sundquist's words, to read "[w]hat is revealed in the interstices of the text."⁵⁶ Although Sundquist goes on to argue that the text is in fact "a joint semiotic construction," the image of legibility usefully raises questions about Baldwin's views on black language, where he insists that "the white man, believing what he wishes to believe, has misread the symbols."⁵⁷ Baldwin's pronouncement, echoing Zora Neale Hurston's famous statement that "the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics," must be read in the context of an established African-American history of enforced duplicity.⁵⁸ As Gates has argued:

⁵⁵ Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," *Nobody Knows*, 115.

⁵⁶ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (London & Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1993), 48.

⁵⁷ Sundquist, 39; Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," *Notes*, 67.

⁵⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African-American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell [1934] (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1994), 80.

Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures. Misreading signs could be, and indeed often was, fatal.⁵⁹

But in Baldwin's case, it is not clear whether the black experience, which is told in "symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics," can be learned, decoded, read; or whether there is an innate, essential difference.⁶⁰

Whilst Julian Mayfield forcefully argued in *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), that the movement is not "a secret language invented by black people to confound the whites . . . a special language dredged up out of the black experience," Baldwin's position is not clear.⁶¹ Despite Baldwin's refutation of his African past, at times he acknowledges that his African ancestors have passed something down to him, what Baldwin obliquely refers to as a "mystery."⁶²

In a conversation with Nikki Giovanni, Baldwin invokes the historical coding that Gates has outlined, stating that:

⁵⁹ Gates, *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, 6.

⁶⁰ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," *Notes*, 29.

⁶¹ Julian Mayfield, "You Can Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 23.

⁶² James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (New York: Dell, 1971), 100, 115; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Rap*.

What we call black literature is really summed up for me by the whole career, let's say, of Bessie Smith, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, because that's how it's been handed down, since we couldn't read or write. . . . We had to smuggle information, and we did it through our music and we did it in the church (*D*, 79).

But this smuggling, Baldwin suggests, continues: "I will be able to accept critical judgements when I understand that they [white critics] understand Ray Charles," a statement evocative of Thelonius Monk's comment on bebop music: "we're going to create something they can't steal because they [white folks] can't play it" (*D*, 84).⁶³ Similarly, in *Rap on Race*, Baldwin again states, both how it is "very sinister that no one knows what Ray Charles is singing about," but also raises the fundamental problem of communication. "[h]ow," Baldwin asks Margaret Mead, "are we ever going to achieve some kind of language which will make my experience articulate to you and yours to me?"⁶⁴

⁶³ Cited by Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 68; see also Baldwin's *One Day When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on the Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Dell, 1972), where the screen directions refer to the sound of a "white" jazz band (43, 82).

⁶⁴ James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *Rap*, 70, 158.

Baldwin's views bear a striking similarity to those outlined by LeRoi Jones in his polemical essay, "The Myth of a 'Negro' Literature." Like Baldwin's later comments, Jones offers the blues as a model for black art, insisting that:

Blues and jazz have been the only consistent exhibitors of "Negritude" in formal American culture simply because the bearers of its tradition maintained their essential identities as Negroes; in no other art (and I will persist in calling Negro music, Art) has this been possible (*H*, 106).

Whilst Jones goes further than Baldwin, maintaining that, since all African-American literature has been based on white models, it has never really existed, the parallels are revealing.⁶⁵ Although Baldwin at times referred to his literary antecedents for *Another Country* as Conrad, James, and Dostoevesky, he elsewhere claimed that his models were jazz musicians, with his aim to "write the way they sound." In Ray Charles and Miles Davis in particular, Baldwin found that they "sing a kind of universal blues," a statement that contradicts his discussion with Nikki

⁶⁵ See Gates, *Figures in Black*, where he takes issue with Houston Baker's early claim that black literature should be measured by how far it repudiates white artistic models (35).

Giovanni, where jazz and the blues are unreadable to white critics.⁶⁶

At this juncture Jones's precise and confident imagery elucidates Baldwin's somewhat confused rhetoric. For Jones, African-Americans have always straddled boundaries, whether racial, cultural or economic. It is from this very position, what Jones terms "this no-man's land," that gave black music its peculiar strength. It is, this chapter will argue, from within Jones's located space--"a no-man's land, a black country, completely invisible to white America," that forms the model for Baldwin's third novel.

The central problem that Baldwin wrestles with, as I illustrate in *Another Country* is his exploration of both the need and absurdity for categorisation. By de-essentialising race ("[p]eople invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity"), Baldwin attempts to illustrate the absurdity and arbitrariness of such taxonomy (*D*, 88). Yet, at other times, Baldwin veers towards the suggestion of an innate "blackness," calling for black Americans to "excavate something that has been buried," an image which invokes Michael Awkward's critique of Black Aestheticians "who demand

⁶⁶ Cited by Leeming, 206.

that critics dig beneath the phrase and unearth the treasures of beauty lying deep in the untoured regions of the Black experience" (*D*, 21).⁶⁷ On occasions Baldwin warned that slogans such as "Black is beautiful" were dangerous, even fascistic, which sits uneasily with his earlier comment that "black people . . . are very beautiful," or his comment to W.J. Weatherby that "[w]here the Negro is unique is in a kind of beauty. They are a very beautiful people" (*D*, 62; *FNT*, 88).⁶⁸

The paradox, as Baldwin's recollection of exile reveal, is that it is only with the dismantling of categories that the terrifying ordeal of excavation can begin:

In America, the colour of my skin had stood between myself and me; in Europe, that barrier was down. Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch. It turned out that the question of who I was was not solved because I had removed myself from the social forces which menaced me--anyway, these forces had become interior, and I had

⁶⁷ Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 30.

dragged them across the ocean with me.
 The question of who I was had at last
 become a personal question, and the
 answer was to be found in me.⁶⁹

Another Country, I argue, explores the effects of chaos that result from the decimation of barriers. A moment that Baldwin poignantly described in *The Fire Next Time*, when the black child first realises his racial difference, exhorted by his parents "when he has strayed beyond some particular boundary" (*FNT*, 31). Baldwin's third novel examines the terror of barriers torn asunder, the fear of formlessness, of dark forces that cannot be quelled by moving to another country.

3. Re-Viewing *Another Country*

"I've been trying to do that in a long poem," Lorenzo said, "you know, Romeo and Juliet today, only she's black and he's white."

James Baldwin, *Another Country*

⁶⁸ W.J. Weatherby, *Squaring Off: Mailer V. Baldwin* (London: Robson Books, 1977), 63.

⁶⁹ James Baldwin, "Introduction," *Nobody Knows*, 11. In "Previous Condition," the narrator reflects how "[t]here are times and places when a Negro can use his shield," suggesting what Baldwin

"In America, black is a country."

LeRoi Jones, *Home: Social Essays*

Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country* (1962), relentlessly examines the question of whether white and black Americans can ever truly understand one another. And nowhere is this problem more acute than in the question of love, as Baldwin later made clear. In 1964 Baldwin recalled that his aim in *Another Country* was "to show how a difference of skin color between two lovers could corrupt everything, even the most sincere and intimate feelings."⁷⁰ Describing the demise and then suicide of the novel's black protagonist, Baldwin insisted that Rufus Scott is "the black corpse floating in the national psyche," urging readers to face up to the harsh realities of racism within America.⁷¹

Yet despite Baldwin's intentions to jolt his audience into a re-examination of America's legacy of racial oppression, both white and black critics

means by his "crutch," *Going to Meet the Man* [1948] (London: Penguin, 1991), 87; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Going*.

⁷⁰ Cited by Bobia, 37.

⁷¹ Leeming, 201.

largely dismissed *Another Country*.⁷² Writing in the late 1970s, Eugenia W. Collier neatly summarised the critical response to Baldwin's third novel, which has, she writes, "as the cliché says, something for everyone--in this instance, something offensive for everyone."⁷³ Few critics were more outraged than Roderick Nordell, whose vexed review in 1962 denounced *Another Country* as "an obscene book;" it was, Nordell fumed, "a sordid story of whites and Negroes, bohemians, homosexuality and miscegenation."⁷⁴ Although *Another Country* reached sales of some four million, the majority of critics were dismissive of Baldwin's first commercial success.⁷⁵ For Robert Bone, Baldwin's effort was "a failure on the grand scale," illustrating his inability to transfer his brilliant essayistic ideas into the imaginative medium of the novel.⁷⁶ Other critics, such as George Kent, offered editorial advice, suggesting "severe cutting and

⁷² For a useful overview of *Another Country's* reviews, see Mike Thelwell, "Another Country: Baldwin's New York Novel," *The Black American Writer: Vol. 1: Fiction*, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1969), 181-98. He writes that much criticism from New York was "the most fatuous, inept and at times downright dishonest criticism that I had ever seen" (182).

⁷³ Cited by Laura Quinn, "'What is Going on Here?' Baldwin's *Another Country*," *Gay and Lesbian Literature Since the War: History and Memory*, ed. Sonya L. Jones (London & New York: Harrington Press, 1998), 51.

⁷⁴ Cited by Emmanuel Nelson, "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction," *Journal of American Culture* 14 (1991): 94.

⁷⁵ Campbell notes that, when reissued in paperback in 1963, *AC* "was the second-largest-selling book of the year" (157).

intensive rewriting" in order to transform *Another Country* into "a serious novel of the first rank," instead of "the level of a women's magazine."⁷⁷

The charges levelled at *Another Country* by Bone and Kent is symptomatic of a larger critical unease. An unease manifested in two distinct responses between those critics who found the descriptions of sex (particularly scenes involving homosexuality/ bisexuality) repulsive, and others who criticised Baldwin's political stance. For some, Baldwin's relentless critique of white liberalism was too harsh, whilst for others, Baldwin's emphasis on individual, rather than collective suffering, undermined its political radicalism.

Nordell's indignant response to *Another Country* was by no means an exception. As late as 1968 the novel was banned at Montana State University, with one teacher branded a "smut peddler" for including Baldwin's novel on his course.⁷⁸ Patrick Crutwell, reviewing *Another Country* in 1963 deplored Baldwin's "total obsession with sex," concluding that the novel is "just one long ugly hysterical chronicle of sex-

⁷⁶ Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1958; rev. ed. 1965), 228.

⁷⁷ George E. Kent, "Baldwin and the Problem of Being," *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Therman. B. O'Daniel (Washington: Howard University Press, 1981), 26, 27.

⁷⁸ Leeming, 200.

misereries which are blamed on American society."⁷⁹ Crutwell's refusal to acknowledge that such "sex-misereries" could be part of the fabric of American society was echoed by Saul Maloff, who described the setting of *Another Country* as "that misty region on the nether side of society where alienated men and women act out their racial and sexual encounters."⁸⁰ Even Maloff's determination to sweep interracial affairs to the peripheries of American society was surpassed by Whitney Balliet, who wrote that "the lovemaking, graphically and frequently presented, seems far larger than life because it is generally between males or between Negroes and whites."⁸¹

At a time when the F.B.I. were publishing pamphlets such as *Combating Merchants of Filth: The Role of the FBI, Let's Wipe out the Schoolyard Sex Racket!* and *The Fight Against Filth*," it is hardly surprising that some readers and reviewers were offended by descriptions of homosexual sex (TG, 158).⁸² The words "fuck" and "cunt" were deemed too obscene

⁷⁹ Cited by Nelson: 94.

⁸⁰ Cited by Andrea Lowenstein, "James Baldwin and His Critics," *Gay Community News* (9 February 1980): 10.

⁸¹ Cited by Nelson: 94.

⁸² For two accounts of the furore generated by *AC*, see Lawrence Amey, Timothy L. Hall, et al., ed. *Censorship: Volume 1* (Pasadena & Englewood Cliffs, Salem Press, Inc., 1997), 59; also Nicholas J. Karolides, Margaret Bald, and Dawn B. Sova, *100 Banned Books: Censorship Histories of World Literature*, introd. Ken Wachsberger (New York: Checkmark Books, 1999), 344-6.

for print, and both William Burrough's *Naked Lunch* and Henry Miller's *Tropic* books were still banned on similar grounds (TG, 154). The year before *Another Country* was published, *The Sixth Man* spent three months on the *New York Times* best-seller list, accusing homosexuality "for social maladies ranging from the rising divorce rate to juvenile crime and the defeminization of women."⁸³ Not surprisingly, critics lambasted what they saw as Baldwin's elevation of homosexuality, characterised by Robert Bone's confident appeal to the reader that "homosexuality will seem rather an evasion than an affirmation of human truth."⁸⁴ Like Bone, David Littlejohn bemoaned "the over lyrical poeticizing of homosexual love," which he insisted "is one of the real flaws of the book."⁸⁵

Baldwin's reasons for exploring the psycho-sexuality of American society had been articulated a year before *Another Country*, as I discussed in my previous chapter. "In most of the novels written by Negroes," insisted Baldwin, "there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this

⁸³ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: the Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 139.

⁸⁴ Bone, 234.

⁸⁵ Cited by Nelson: 93.

space is violence."⁸⁶ Singling out Richard Wright, Baldwin complained that the psychological motives for violence were left unexamined. Wright's naturalistic mode, Baldwin argued, in his emphasis on social factors left no space for "[t]he specifically sexual horror faced by a Negro . . ."⁸⁷ By attacking Wright's naturalistic mode of narrative, Baldwin argued that, although the environment contributed to African-American subjectivity, characters like Bigger Thomas could not be reduced to a sum of the social effects.

In an ironic twist, many reviewers unfavourably compared Baldwin's protagonist in *Another Country*, Rufus Scott, to Wright's Bigger Thomas. In short, the consensus was that Baldwin had produced an aborted social-protest novel. Robert Bone, for example, stated that "Rufus . . . is a peculiarly passive Bigger Thomas, whose murderous impulses turn back on himself."⁸⁸ Irving Howe went further in his comparison with *Native Son*, stating that "anyone vindictive enough to make the effort could score against [*Another Country*] the points Baldwin scored against Wright."⁸⁹ More recently still, Terry Rowden interprets Baldwin's

⁸⁶ Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," *Nobody Knows*, 154.

⁸⁷ Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," *Nobody Knows*, 154.

⁸⁸ Bone, 231.

⁸⁹ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Selected Writings, 1950-1990* [1963] (San Diego, New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 134.

third novel as a "turn to the kind of protest writing for which he had previously chided Richard Wright . . ."⁹⁰

I am less interested here in whether Baldwin was indebted to Wright's protest fiction, or whether *Another Country* tropes on *Native Son*. What remains clear is the insistence of many reviewers and critics to measure *Another Country* with a barometer of socio-political effectiveness. Claudia Tate's study, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998) convincingly argues that there is a clear correlation between neglected African-American texts and those that do not measure up to the "materialist or sociological analyses that constitute the familiar racial paradigm."⁹¹ Texts by African-American authors, she notes, are scrutinised for their depiction of "the injustice of black protagonists' persistent and contested encounters with the material and psychological effects of a racially exploitative distribution of social good, services and power."⁹²

Tate's insights into the African-American canon offer a useful way of interpreting criticism of *Another Country*. Addison Gayle, Jr., accused Baldwin,

⁹⁰ Terry Rowden, "A Play of Abstractions: Race, Sexuality and Community in James Baldwin's *Another Country*," *Southern Review* 29 (1993): 42.

not only of advocating an "integrationist ethic," but of displaying a remarkable lack of "knowledge of the history and culture of black people." Baldwin, Gayle continues, is "totally ignorant," not only of black people, but of black writers such as Richard Wright.⁹³ Gayle's virulent critique of Baldwin's third novel bears striking parallels to Norman Mailer's dismissal of *Another Country*. Noting that it was "abominably written," Mailer went on to argue that Saul Bellow's *Henderson and the Rain King*, "succeeds in telling us more about the depths of the black man's psyche than Baldwin did."⁹⁴

Both Tate's analysis of African-American literature and Gayle's criticism of *Another Country* suggest that Cleaver's derogation of Baldwin's novel is not merely a homophobic response, but an outraged response at what he saw as Baldwin's privileging of sex and sexuality over racial injustice. For Cleaver, Baldwin had abdicated his social responsibility, concluding with the corollary that *Another Country* was "void of a political, economic, or even a social reference" (*SOI*, 109). If Baldwin, as Cleaver inferred, was offering up love as a social panacea,

⁹¹ Tate, 9.

⁹² Tate, 4.

⁹³ Gayle, *The Way of the New World*, 220, 219.

then he was clearly deluded: "in the North American reality hate holds sway in love's true province" (*SOI*, 108).

Cleaver's dismissal of sex/ love as a social palliative must be seen in the context of growing civil rights uprisings. LeRoi Jones's essays, *Home: Social Essays*, written between 1960-5, offer a stark contrast to the advice offered by Baldwin to his nephew; that he should "accept them [whites] and accept them with love" (*FNT*, 16).⁹⁵ Jones describes how he severed all ties with white people, preparing himself for what he describes, in 1963, as a "war going on now in the United States" (*H*, 133). Jones's account is particularly useful as it highlights criticism that Baldwin was more concerned with individual than with social oppression. In what would become a prelude to Cleaver's virulent attack on Baldwin, Jones wrote:

Again, the cry, the spavined whine and pleas of these Baldwins and [Peter] Abrahams is sickening past belief. Why should anyone think of these men as individuals? Merely because they are able to shriek the shriek of a

⁹⁴ Cited by W.J. Weatherby, *Squaring Off*, 162-3.

⁹⁵ See Cleaver, who states that most African-Americans were "baffled" by Baldwin's comment (106-7).

fashionable international body of white middle class society. Joan of Arc of the cocktail party is what is being presented through the writings and postures of men like these (*H*, 117).

Jones's disdainful references to Baldwin's sexuality are explicit and are clearly connected to what he sees as the older writer's revolutionary impotence.

According to Jones, Baldwin and Abrahams are more concerned with their "gay exotic plumage" of ideas, and are too "sensitive" to engage with "such 'ugly' things as the racial struggle." By describing Baldwin and Abrahams as "too hip to be real black men," and by stating that if they "were turned white . . . there would be no more noise from them," Jones denigrates the two authors, emphasising his correlation between whiteness and homosexuality (*H*, 117-8).⁹⁶

Jones's repeated dismissal of Baldwin's focus on the individual feeds into larger debates in black consciousness.⁹⁷ According to Addison Gayle, Jr.,

⁹⁶ See Rowden who writes of how Rufus, on account of his sexuality, cannot "be genuinely black" (44); see also Charles P. Toombs, "Black-gay-man chaos in Another Country," *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, where he states that Rufus, because of his homosexuality, "is not presented as a black man" (108).

⁹⁷ See for example, *A Dialogue*, where Baldwin discusses the demise of the individual in black politics (60); see also Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* [1974] (London: The Women's Press, 1990) where she repeatedly effaces her personal contributions, stating her concerns that "concentration on my personal history might detract from the movement" (xvi).

African-American literature is marked by a shift from 1952-72. The novel became, Gayle contends, "less the medium of expressing one's personal angst than the medium of expressing the experience of race."⁹⁸

Similarly, Ron Kerenga, voicing this shift, noted in his essay, "Black Cultural Nationalism," that "individualism is a luxury that we cannot afford, moreover, individualism is, in effect, non-existent."⁹⁹

Not surprisingly, many critics were confounded by what they interpreted as Baldwin's privileging of love over radical politics. Paul Goodman, reviewing *Another Country* in 1962, complained that "[l]ove does not lead to community, procreation, productive collaboration, character change, or even personal security."¹⁰⁰

Echoing Goodman, LeRoi Jones stated that the phrase "'[p]eople should love each other,' . . . has very little meaning to the world at large" (*H*, 119). Lest such criticism be attributed to the fervour of an inflamed political era, much later critics have also puzzled over Baldwin's faith in the power of love. William A. Cohen makes the reasonable point that Baldwin transferred what he could not say about race to the area of sexual relations:

⁹⁸ Gayle, *The Way of the World*, 259.

⁹⁹ Ron Kerenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," *The Black Aesthetic*, 34.

By 1962 . . . in the face of increased black activism and demands for civil rights, it would have seemed disingenuous for Baldwin to claim that individual love could conquer racial discord.¹⁰¹

What troubles Cohen, however, is that however "revolutionary" Baldwin's revision of the humanistic idea of salvation through love, sexuality is always relegated to the private realm.

Any attempts to map the reviews of *Another Country* lead to one contradiction after another. Michael Thelwell is surely right to suggest that the furore that greeted Baldwin's third novel might tell us more about the social climate that produced *Another Country* than about the work itself.¹⁰² And yet the criticism generated by *Another Country* is notably contradictory. Thus, whilst George Kent, echoing Cleaver and Jones, writes dismissively of how in *Another Country*, "the social criticism is inert," Stanley Macebuh finds a Baldwin who is "more concerned with protest and cries for social justice than with

¹⁰⁰ Cited by Lowenstein, 10.

¹⁰¹ William A. Cohen, "Liberalism, Libido, Liberation: Baldwin's *Another Country*," *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 216.

¹⁰² Michael Thelwell, "Baldwin's New York Novel," *The Black American Writer*, 155; for an article that summarises the harsh criticism of *AC*, see Norman Podhoretz, "In Defense of a Maltreated Best Seller," *Show 2*, no. 10 (October 1962): 91-2.

the truth in individuals' lives."¹⁰³ Again, whilst some critics accused Baldwin of political inertia, others, such as Edward Margolies complained that "Baldwin's anger somewhat shrouds his art."¹⁰⁴ For Terry Rowden, Rufus "is the depiction of a pathology that is never explicitly acknowledged," whilst for Lorelei Cedelstrom Baldwin "presents a fully-developed picture of black rage and the societal elements which have worked to produce that rage."¹⁰⁵

The reasons for the disparate critical views of *Another Country* are in part illuminated by Rebecca Aanerud's recent article. Aanerud argues that white liberalism had reached its peak in the 1960s, which, by implication, might explain many white reviewers' discomfort with Baldwin's relentless attack on their ideological position, a connection that Michael Thelwell explicitly makes.¹⁰⁶ Later reviewers, as Benjamin DeMott has suggested, had been exposed to

¹⁰³ George Kent, "Baldwin and the Problem of Being," *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Therman B. O'Daniel, 27; Michael F. Lynch, "Beyond Guilt and Innocence: Redemptive Suffering in Baldwin's *Another Country*," *Obsidian* ii 7 (spring-summer 1992): 1.

¹⁰⁴ Edward Margolies, "The Negro Church: James Baldwin and the Christian Vision," *James Baldwin: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 73.

¹⁰⁵ Rowden, 42; Lorelei Cedelstrom, "Love, Race and Sex in the Novels of James Baldwin," *Mosaic* 17, no. 2 (spring 1984): 179.

¹⁰⁶ Rebecca Aanerud, "Now More than Ever: James Baldwin and the Critique of White Liberalism," *James Baldwin Now*, 56-74, esp. 57-8; see Thelwell, "Another Country: Baldwin's New York Novel," *The Black American Writer*, 188.

Baldwin's own dramatic ideological shifts, which I chart in my first chapter. Baldwin's earlier statements, such as "[n]o one in the world . . . knows Americans better or . . . loves them more than the American Negro," enraged the black militancy of the late 1960s.¹⁰⁷ By *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin had amended his message of love, including, as DeMott points out, "a saving remnant committed to raising levels of consciousness."¹⁰⁸ By 1972, as I noted in my first chapter, Baldwin had fuelled his prose with borrowed rhetoric from the Black Power movement.

And yet a more straightforward explanation to the confusion generated by *Another Country* may in fact be attributed to the argument that Baldwin's third novel, conceived, written and set in the 1950s, belongs to the political and social sways of the earlier decade.¹⁰⁹ As Lorelei Cederstrom points out, "[t]he climate of the late fifties in which Baldwin's novel was set offered little possibility for social revolution, leaving Rufus with only the self-destructive path of individual rebellion."¹¹⁰ If the

¹⁰⁷ Cited by Benjamin DeMott, "James Baldwin on the Sixties: Acts and Revelations," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, inc., 1974), 155.

¹⁰⁸ DeMott, 155.

¹⁰⁹ William Cohen convincingly works out the date of 1956 by working out in Book 2, ch. 1, that Yves, who is 21, had been five during the German occupation of 1940 (n. 219).

¹¹⁰ Cederstrom: 181.

novel is located within the 1950s, Baldwin's novel can be read, less as a timely social comment on the mounting civil rights tensions, but more as a reply to prominent critics such as Lionel Trilling, who insisted that racial matters were subordinate to class as a focus for the novelist.¹¹¹

Yet despite such potentially clarifying claims, *Another Country* remains Baldwin's most puzzling and enigmatic work. If, as Baldwin stated, Rufus is "the black corpse floating in the national psyche," why is the black community largely absent from the novel? And why is the only developed African-American male character, Rufus Scott, killed off in the first fifth of the novel? Why, in William Cohen's words, is "the figure for Baldwin's self-representation--the gay black man--so determinedly written out of the work that, he insisted he "had to write?"¹¹² If white liberalism can offer no answer to "the racial nightmare," what suggestions does Baldwin give? (*FNT*, 89). How is the reader to reconcile Baldwin's views that there is an impasse between black and white, that they can never understand one another, with Ida's insistence "you've got to know, you've got to know

¹¹¹ See Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, esp. 168.

¹¹² Cohen, 202.

what's happening?"¹¹³ Is Baldwin toeing a liberal humanistic line--"the suffering of any person is really universal"--or he is suggesting that there are irreconcilable differences between black and white?¹¹⁴

This chapter will argue that *Another Country* radically revises his earlier, more optimistic statement that "the only real concern of the artist, [is] to re-create out of the disorder of life that order which is art."¹¹⁵ *Another Country*, I argue, focuses on what Baldwin, writing about his third novel, termed the "incoherence" of American life. An incoherence most keenly illustrated by the absurdity of racial discrimination, as his essay, "The Lost Generation," published in 1961 suggests. Recalling how his best friend committed suicide, like Rufus, by hurling himself off George Washington Bridge, Baldwin charts his loss of faith in politics and love, resolving to leave America.¹¹⁶ The essay is particularly insightful as it deftly and simply outlines what Baldwin saw as the absurdity of racial discrimination. His friend, Baldwin is certain, "would not have died in such a way and certainly not so soon,

¹¹³ James Baldwin, *Another Country* [1962] (London: Penguin, 1990), 340; hereafter abbreviated as AC.

¹¹⁴ Cited by Baldwin, "The Negro in American Culture," [transcript], *The Black American Writer*, 80.

¹¹⁵ Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," *Notes*, 15.

¹¹⁶ Baldwin, "The Lost Generation," [1961] *Price*, 305-7.

if he had not been black." Crucially, Baldwin adds parenthetically, "([i]legally speaking. Physically, he was almost, but not quite, light enough to pass)."¹¹⁷

My aim is not to offer a biographical reading of *Another Country*, despite the striking similarities between the account of his friend's suicide in "The Lost Generation," and the death of Rufus Scott. Rather, Baldwin's image of his friend's mid-way point ("almost, but not quite, light enough to pass") serves a useful paradigm for a novel that focuses so heavily on boundaries, bridges and gaps. Rufus's death, occurring at the mid-point between two sites, invokes and illustrates the chaos that *Another Country* explores.

¹¹⁷ Baldwin, "The Lost Generation," *Price*, 307.

**4. Islands, Bridges and Communication in Another
Country**

Walls turned sideways
are bridges

Angela Davis, *An Autobiography*

That moment on the Bridge had undone me
forever

James Baldwin, "This Morning, This
Evening, So Soon"

Recollecting his vision of Manhattan in *Another Country*, Baldwin referred to it as "the most unmerciful city in the Western world."¹¹⁸ Not only is this New York unmerciful but *Another Country* plagues the reader with a myriad of stifling and haunting images. This is a malevolent and encroaching New York, full of "brutal sounds;" a menacing city that "stared unsympathetically," casting shadows over unwelcoming doorways, a city where "danger and horror [are] barely sleeping beneath the rough, gregarious surface" (AC,

26, 36, 227). And, like Eliot's narrator in *The Waste Land*, who "had not thought death had undone so many," the city is (un) peopled with "dead eyes," a world already "full of dead folks" (AC, 49, 124).¹¹⁹

It is into this cold and inhospitable terrain that Baldwin's characters are thrust, beginning with the demise and suicide of the young African-American jazz drummer, Rufus Scott. As in many of Baldwin's novels, the plot is sparse, even nebulous. After Rufus has hurled himself off George Washington Bridge on page 93, the remaining 330 pages examine how Rufus's (white) friends come to terms with his suicide. Like Rufus, the majority of protagonists are artists: the Italian-Irish Vivaldo Moore, Rufus's closet friend is a struggling writer who is less successful but more tormented than his old teacher, Richard, who in turn publishes a popular crime novel. Ida, Rufus's sister, is a jazz singer, and Eric is an actor. And, like Rufus who is alienated from his family and background, like the island of Manhattan itself, all the characters are isolated from one another. Richard is cut off from his Polish roots, married to the patrician Cass. Eric begins the novel in exile in

¹¹⁸ Cited by Bobia, 37.

¹¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 62.

France, estranged by his country and his sexuality. Vivaldo, the aspiring writer, is a stranger to his working-class family.

The isolation that Baldwin relentlessly describes is captured by the fleeting sightings of anonymous couples, "terrified of human affection" (AC, 229). Couples who touch one another, like automata, with perfunctory, mechanical gestures, "hand in hand, but not together" (AC, 132). Like the typist in *The Wasteland* who "smoothes her hair with automatic hand," Baldwin's couples endure "chafing and pushing and pounding," before ending the loveless fumbling with "an apologetic murmur," and then home (AC, 134). Love, but only commercial love, is in the air: "love me" calls out from the radio, and "long, syncopated synthetic laments for love" spew out of the jukebox until they are drowned out by commercials (AN, 114, 79). The young saxophonist whose horn screams "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" cannot offer love, but implores the listener indirectly through his savage horn (AC, 18). Developing the hellish scenes Baldwin had described in "The Male Prison," where "the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased," where one "never meets either men or women," Baldwin again invokes a world where "you do

not meet many human persons at all. They are all dead. Dead" (AC, 208).¹²⁰

The oppressive alienation between the sexes that Baldwin depicts is illustrated by the inability of characters to read one another. The crowds of people are inscrutable, "their faces set ironically and their eyes unreadable" (AC, 118). Communication between the sexes becomes coded, translated, and finally unreadable: "[t]he girls on Fifth Avenue wore their bright clothes like semaphores, trying helplessly to bring the male attention the news of their mysterious trouble. The men could not read this message" (AC, 227). When sexual language is legible, like the graffiti Rufus reads in the toilet--"I like to get whipped. Down with Jews. Kill the niggers"--it is less a message, as James A. Dievler points out, than an urban monument to those "trapped in the noncommunicative language of their sexual culture" (AC, 89).¹²¹ A fear of intimacy pervades the city depicted in *Another Country*, shadowed by couples that both lust for one another, yet recoil from any deeper yielding of the self. But although this theme punctuates the novel, Baldwin's deepest concern is the

¹²⁰ Baldwin, "The Male Prison," *Nobody Knows*, 134.

¹²¹ James A. Dievler, "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*," *James Baldwin Now*, 171.

relationship between blacks and whites. It becomes, in *Another Country*, the most marked manifestation of gulfs created by different cultures, languages, classes and sexualities.¹²²

As the only black male protagonist, Baldwin's examination of race necessarily focuses on Rufus Scott. Like Peter, the hero of Baldwin's earlier short story, "Previous Condition," Rufus uneasily straddles the black and white worlds of Manhattan. Although we are told that Rufus has many black musician friends, he is never shown interacting with them. Like Peter, he is presented as rootless, dispossessed; neither fitting in with the bohemian milieu of Greenwich Village, nor in the bars of Harlem where the sigh of "My people," is questioned when Peter realises that he "didn't seem to have a place."¹²³

Why Rufus feels disconnected from his family and background is never clearly articulated. Charles P. Toombs somewhat glibly suggests that, had Rufus remained in the black community, he would have found a black male lover.¹²⁴ Although Toombs is right to insist

¹²² See Trudier Harris, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), esp. 98-9; Harris writes that "[f]or all its actions, the novel is really more of a treatise on the ideas of isolation, communication, and understanding that the actions are designed to dramatize" (99).

¹²³ Baldwin, "Previous Condition," *Going*, 98, 99.

¹²⁴ Toombs, 117.

on the desirability and possibility of black same sex desire within the African-American community, Baldwin does not suggest that Rufus's sexual orientation is at the heart of his isolation. Although there are clear parallels with Bigger Thomas, whose demise, Wright explained, was formed and precipitated by his remove from "religion and the folk culture of his race," Rufus's isolation from African-American culture is not emphasised as the root cause of his degradation and subsequent suicide.¹²⁵ The only sustained conversation Rufus has with an African-American man is with a wealthy but ruthless entertainer. As if to stress the point that colour does not necessarily breed familiarity, the man is described, like the impersonal white Americans, as a man "who did not encourage intimacy" (AC, 25).

Race, Baldwin forcefully suggests in *Another Country*, does not automatically form the basis for solidarity. The central thesis becomes, primarily through the friendship of Rufus and Vivaldo, whether love and friendship can operate inside of the social forces that impinge upon and constrain the characters

¹²⁵ Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," *Native Son* [1940] (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 513; see also 520. There are also comparisons with LeRoi Jones in *Home: Social Essays*, who writes "I cannot repeat it too many times, nor can any of you black people repeat it too many times to one another. DO NOT

at every turn. If there is any chance of this happening, Baldwin urges white Americans to accept responsibility for their complicity in the racist mechanisms of society. It is a familiar Baldwin theme, one articulated clearly in the short story, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," where the black narrator rails against the tendency to sweep historical injustices aside: "I've never understood why, if I have to pay for the history written in the colour of my skin, you should get off scot-free!"¹²⁶ In *Another Country*, Baldwin contrasts Rufus's inability to forget about the modern "racial nightmare," with Vivaldo's refusal to confront it. Rufus is "bowed down with . . . memory," unable to forget the brutalities he endured in the South, whereas Vivaldo refuses to burden himself: "I really don't want to hear all that shit" (AC, 49, 43).

The relentless references to Rufus's racial difference gnaw away at him like a cancer. Unlike the eponymous invisible man in Ellison's novel, Rufus's visibility in the predominantly white Greenwich Village forces him to see himself as a pawn in black-white history. Like Peter in "Previous Condition" who

ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE SEPARATED from your brothers and sisters, or your culture" (197).

cries "I've been fighting so goddamn long I'm not a person any more," Rufus battles to see himself as an individual, not a synecdoche for the black race.¹²⁷ Nowhere is Rufus forced to acknowledge his blackness more than with his affair with the white Leona. Even the soft lilt of Leona's southern accent hurls Rufus back to the suffering he endured in a southern work camp. Noticing that Leona is the only white woman in the bar "made him [Rufus] uneasy and his uneasiness made him angry" because he seeks to meet Leona on personal, not historical terms (AC, 20).

Rufus's battle to view himself as an individual, not an historical agent, is informed by the self-examination of Jean Veneuse, who, wishing to marry a white European, struggles to see his love outside of the historical ramifications of a black-white dyad. As he contemplates his lover, he wonders whether he is:

drawn on by desire for that white flesh
that has been forbidden to us Negroes as
long as white men have ruled the world,
so that without my knowledge I am
attempting to revenge myself on a
European woman for everything that her
ancestors have inflicted on mine
throughout the centuries (BS, WM, 70).

¹²⁶ James Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," *Going*,

Veneuse's self-interrogation poignantly examines whether interracial desire can be mediated in a vacuum; whether desire can operate unimpeded by historical and political machinations, or whether, as Calvin Hernton concluded in 1965, "in a society where coloured people are discriminated against . . . it is impossible for the racism of sex to be absent."¹²⁸ Like Rufus, who craves the historically forbidden white flesh of a southern woman, the root of desire becomes obfuscated by its political significance. The tragedy for Veneuse is that it happens "without . . . [his] knowledge:" he understands the colonial relationship only too well and cannot disassociate himself from its legacy.

Rufus's relationship with Leona is strangled by the inevitable intrusion of a slave legacy. What begins as making love, "awaking a tenderness for Leona he had not expected to feel," soon becomes translated into a political act of revenge (AC, 30).¹²⁹ During sex, Leona murmurs words that Rufus cannot understand: words not only muffled by the physical exertions of

171.

¹²⁷ James Baldwin, "Previous Condition," *Going*, 92.

¹²⁸ Hernton, 11.

¹²⁹ See Hernton who argues that, historically, black-white relationships are initiated "out of a desire to exploit and wreak vengeance on the women of the civilization which has reduced him to a second-class human being" (13-14); Hernton even calls this the "Rufus type of syndrome" (73).

sex, but a language that symbolises difference. As the following passage gathers momentum, "enacting" the urgent drive to orgasm, we are shown how the violence of history returns as sexual desire--or sexual revenge. Or, as the difficulty of separating desire from revenge:

He wanted her to remember him the longest day she lived. And, shortly, nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs. She began to cry. *I told you*, he moaned, *I told you I'd give you something to cry about.* . . . A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies (AC, 31).

The tenderness that Rufus felt for Leona is brutally transformed into a violent attack, one that anticipates his subsequent rape of her. Like Fanon who writes that "[w]hen my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine," (BS, WM, 63) Rufus ceases to make love to Leona, fucking white history with all his might. He ceases to be Rufus, transforming into

"black men." The penis becomes a "weapon," inflicting pain as well as pleasure, desperately embodying the black sexual stereotype because there is no other recourse. He becomes Peter in "Previous Condition," who is "aware of my body under the bathrobe . . . as though I had done something wrong, something monstrous, years ago, which no one had forgotten and for which I would be killed."¹³⁰ Rufus becomes Cleaver, raping white women as an "insurrectionary act" to avenge the violation of black woman by white men (*SOI*, 14). Rufus is LeRoi Jones, who writes that "the white woman understands that only in the rape sequence is she likely to get cleanly, viciously popped" (*H*, 227). And Rufus is Fanon, who asks does not "this fear of rape [by a black man] not itself cry out for rape?" (*BS, WM*, 156). But the irony for Rufus is that there can be no black-white babies, for Leona's husband has beaten them out of her.

Rufus's inability to forget his blackness is contrasted with Vivaldo's refusal to accept his friend's difference. Vivaldo insists that Rufus's colour is no obstacle to their friendship: they were "equals . . . friends, far beyond the reach of anything so corny and banal as colour" (*AC*, 136).

¹³⁰ James Baldwin, "Previous Condition," *Going*, 90.

Although Baldwin does explore the banality and absurdity of racial difference, Vivaldo is depicted as naïve, precisely because he will not accept the political and social consequences of racial alterity. Vivaldo's insistence that "suffering doesn't have a colour," becomes dangerous because he will not examine how suffering can be caused by racism (AC, 408). By ignoring the reality of racism, Vivaldo failed to help Rufus, as Ida points out: [Vivaldo] "didn't want to know my brother was dying because he doesn't want to know that my brother would still be alive if he hadn't been born black" (AC, 344). In fact, it takes Cass to point out to Vivaldo, that, although terrible things happen to white people too, they don't happen *because* they are white (AC, 117).

Baldwin presents Vivaldo's liberalism as not only naïve, but dishonest. Although Vivaldo iterates the absurdity of racial difference, he will not open his eyes to the devastating consequences of racism. As he wanders through the streets of Harlem, Vivaldo feels that his presence alone shows solidarity, even if he does not quite understand why: "He knew that Harlem was a battlefield and that a war was being waged there day and night--but of the war aims he knew nothing" (AC, 135). Echoing Baldwin's earlier criticism that readers of protest fiction enjoy the "thrill of

virtue" just by reading such a book, Vivaldo is unaware that "the liberal, even revolutionary sentiments of which he was so proud mean nothing to them [African-Americans]" (AC, 135).¹³¹ More dangerous still, Baldwin suggests, is Vivaldo's refusal to link sex and sexuality with racism. In Harlem, Vivaldo's predilection for black women is never interrogated: as he "dropped his load and marked the spot with silver," the economic, racial and sexual consequences of his acts are left unexamined (AC, 135).

Baldwin attempts to explain Vivaldo's inability to understand the problems of Harlem by writing that "it was due to the fact that one knew of battles only what one had accepted of one's own" (AC, 136). But if Baldwin urges self-examination, then he is also keenly aware of the terrors that lurk, deep within the self. Set against the imperatives of Vivaldo and Rufus to look beyond racial differences is the realisation that:

perhaps they had been afraid that if they looked too closely into one another. . . . Each would have found the abyss. Somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white. Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo

¹³¹ Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes*, 24.

had feared and hated Rufus because he was black (AC, 136).

This crucial passage recalls Fanon's question of whether "the white man [can] behave healthily toward the black man and . . . [whether] the black man [can] behave healthily toward the white man." The "abyss," as I will later argue, is a crucial site both of freedom and destruction. But what Baldwin might mean by "behaving healthily" is not clear. Although Vivaldo's liberal humanism is depicted as ineffective and self-interested, it is not clear what other options are available. Ida's rebuttal to Cass: "there's no way in the world for you to know what Rufus went through, not in this world, not as long as you're white," lingers, clouding any hope of resolution (AC, 334). Language becomes charged, nothing is innocent; personal actions have to be interpreted politically. Vivaldo's affectionate comment to Rufus that he feels "paternal" towards his friend cannot be articulated outside of American history, which Rufus's reply reveals: "That's the trouble with all you white bastards" (AC, 36). When Rufus, in desperation, rails against white racism, his inability to even look at Vivaldo, reveals an involuntary synecdochial tendency: Vivaldo, as a

white man, cannot stand apart from white racism (AC, 74).

Rufus's suicide suggests that blacks and whites have reached an insurmountable impasse. As Rufus waits for his subway train, a journey that will lead him to his suicide, he realises that "we ain't never going to make it. We been fucked for fair," echoing the tormented saxophonist who "had received a blow from which he would never recover" (AC, 92, 18). But although Rufus is a musician, Baldwin does not allow him to articulate his grief, like the saxophonist, through music. Rufus becomes like Peter in "Previous Condition," who cannot articulate what is happening to him: "how can I explain to you what it feels like to be black when I don't understand it?"¹³² In Rufus's case, his inability to communicate his situation is brutally played out at the moment of his death by the glimmer of car lights that "seemed to be writing an endless message, writing with awful speed in a fine, unreadable script" (AC, 93). It is only in the act of suicide, hurling himself into the abyss, that Rufus can communicate his depravity.

Yet if Baldwin, through Rufus's suicide, suggests that the characters in *Another Country* "ain't never

¹³² Baldwin, "Previous Condition," *Going*, 92.

going to make it," then the site of the suicide--George Washington Bridge--functions as a crucial symbol in the novel, a metaphor that offers the possibility of connection. The bridge serves as a reminder of the imperative and the impossibility of interconnecting sites, a theme that Baldwin addressed two years before the publication of *Another Country*:

When I am writing a novel, I am writing about me and all of you, and the great difficulty is to discover what connects us. Something connects us, and what it is is hidden.¹³³

Although Baldwin did not articulate what *did* connect people, the narrative device in *Another Country* suggests that race, gender, class and sexuality do not generate mutually exclusive, but mutually constitutive sites. By unfolding the narrative through the main characters' consciousness, Baldwin was able to present, as Robert Corber has forcefully argued, "a series of dialogic encounters between characters of different races, classes, and genders which showed that such categories were mutually constitutive and could not be understood apart from one another."¹³⁴

¹³³ Cited by Louis H. Pratt, *James Baldwin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 21.

¹³⁴ Corber, 162.

But if the narrative structure functions as a bridge, connecting otherwise isolated groups, then it is significant that Ida does not inhabit a centre of intelligence. Perhaps Baldwin is reminding the predominantly white readership that it cannot easily "understand" the condition of a black African-American woman simply by reading the novel, a point that is explicitly made by Ida when reprimanding Cass: "You don't know, and there's no way in the world for you to find out, what it's like to be a black girl in this world . . ." (AC, 341). Ida is repeatedly described as gazing "unreadably," defying Vivaldo who finds "something in her face which he could not read . . ." (AC, 126, 167).

Baldwin's isolation of Ida is crucial to the novel's message. George Washington Bridge crosses the Hudson River connecting upper Manhattan and Fort Lee, New Jersey. Symbolically, it may represent mediation between black and white, straight and gay, or male and female. But although the bridge connects two sites, the structure itself is stranded, occupying neither one site nor the other. In particular, the centre of the bridge is a no-man's land, neither leaning towards one site nor the other. It is a locus that LeRoi Jones describes as the potential creative point of the culturally and socially marooned African-American:

There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excess of cultural or spiritual reference. . . . It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, sub-cultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no-man's land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music. And this is the only way for the Negro artist to provide his version of America--from that no-man's-land outside the mainstream. A no-man's-land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it to stain its whole being an ominous gray (H, 114).

Jones's meditation on black creativity locates its source not just from the margins, but the indices of culture. Although Jones focuses on the source of black music, his location of a "no-man's land" points to the uncharted space between African and American, the hyphen that both connects and separates the two, the gap that Sundquist describes in his attempt to locate Nat Turner's voice from between the spaces of his lawyer's words.

In *Another Country* Baldwin specifically locates Rufus's journey and eventual death at this no-man's

land, this juncture between opposing sites. Rufus begins the journey to his death from the (white) uptown to the (black) downtown. Baldwin emphasises Rufus's detachment from all those around him: he feels "as removed from them . . . as he might have felt from a fence" (AC, 89). Whilst in the subway train, the racial divide is brutally highlighted: "[m]any white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other" (AC, 92). But significantly, Rufus decides not to get off at the stop where his "fellow" African-Americans depart, remaining, instead until he reaches the George Washington stop.¹³⁵ Crucially, Rufus is situated in midtown, caught between the black and white districts. James A. Dievler makes the astute point that "[t]he linking of Rufus with midtown is meant to position him in a void space, not only physically between Harlem and the Village but between the race, gender, and sexuality categories."¹³⁶ Similarly, when Rufus is about to enter the subway station, he is passed by two

¹³⁵ George Washington Bridge had, at the time, the largest free-flying American flag (http://www.panynj.gov/tbt/GWB_about.htm); see "This Morning, This Evening," *Going where the narrator recalls, "I had seen the flag which was nominally mine used to dignify the vilest purposes"* (163). In AC there is a clear irony intended when Rufus gets off at "the station named for the bridge built to honour the father of his country" (92).

white couples on the "middle of the avenue," just as he throws himself off "the centre of the bridge" (AC, 90, 93; emphasis mine).

Dievler's comment about the significance of Rufus's "void space" is well taken, and may recall Mary Douglas's reminder that "[d]anger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable."¹³⁷ However, although Dievler then goes on to argue that Baldwin "asserts that all these categories are intertwined," he is quick to suggest that Baldwin is "advocating a postcategorical, poststructural concept of sexuality that we might call 'postsexuality.'"¹³⁸

Dievler's argument might be seen as an early example of what Henry Louis Gates has referred to as Baldwin's later insistence on "exploring the instability of all the categories that divide us."¹³⁹ Gates cites the oft quoted passage from "Here Be Dragons," where Baldwin wrote that "[e]ach of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other--male in female, female in male, white in black, and black in

¹³⁶ James A. Dievler, "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and Another Country," *James Baldwin Now*, 172.

¹³⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 96.

¹³⁸ Dievler, 163.

¹³⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Welcome Table," *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of*

white. We are a part of each other."¹⁴⁰ But if Baldwin was adamant in *Another Country* that identity categories were limiting--that they must be transcended--neither Gates nor Dievler point to Baldwin's ambivalence about a world free of categorisation. The bridge connects to other sites, but is also Rufus's place of destruction. Less utopic in the sense of "ideal," but in the etymological sense of "no place." Although, as I show, Eric is posited as the Baldwin archetype/ hero, the author also suggests, through Rufus and Vivaldo, that categories and form are pivotal to society. It is a paradox that Vivaldo wrestles with, asking both "[w]hat order could prevail against so grim a privacy? And yet, without order, what value was mystery?" (AC, 297).

Eric, for many critics, is a "sexually messianic figure;" the hero of the novel who bridges racial and sexual divides.¹⁴¹ He is first pictured in an Edenic garden with his French lover, Yves, moving back to America, where he faces up to his past love affair with Rufus. During the novel he sleeps with both Cass and Vivaldo, functioning as a crossroads of racial and sexual traffic. In a crucial scene towards the end of

Assimilation, ed. Gerald Early (London, New York, etc., Allen Lane, 1993), 162.

¹⁴⁰ Cited by Gates, "The Welcome Table," *Fear and Loathing*, 162.

the novel, whilst acting in his latest film, he is exulted by Vivaldo:

It was the face of a tormented man. Yet, in precisely the same way that great music depends, ultimately, on great silence, this masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by something which was not masculine. But it was not feminine either, and something in Vivaldo resisted the word *androgynous*. . . . But, as most women are not gentle, nor most men strong, it was a face which suggested, resonantly, in the depths, the truth about our natures (AC, 324).

Eric is described as the perfect Baldwin character. Early, people in the Village were "wondering how to place him," for he seems to perfectly straddle the midway point between masculine and feminine, and in his bisexuality to be neither straight nor gay (AN, 245). Although Vivaldo hesitates to term him "androgynous," Eric prefigures Baldwin's later assertion in "Here Be Dragons," that "[w]e are all androgynous."¹⁴²

Vivaldo's irresolute definition of Eric as "androgynous" is most probably a contemporary synonym

¹⁴¹ Rowden, 44; see also Bone, who contemptuously refers to Eric as "the high priest of ineffable phallic mysteries" (234).

¹⁴² Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 690.

for bisexual. But importantly the word is imbued both in the positive sense of possessing male and female characteristics, but also as, Francette Pançeau has pointed out, a "dual sexual identity," and a "non-sexual identity."¹⁴³ This distinction is crucial to the two other moments in the novel when categories are dismantled. For they point to, rather than an idealised subject, the negation of subjectivity: the unfettered chaos of the abject.

As Rufus makes his journey to George Washington Bridge, he envisages an apocalyptic moment when the passengers struggle in frenzied chaos to break free from their chains:

He saw the train in the tunnel, rushing under water . . . the train never stopping and the people screaming at windows and doors and turning on each other with all the accumulated fury of their blasphemed lives, everything gone out of them but murder, breaking limb from limb and splashing in blood, with joy--for the first time, joy, joy, after such a long sentence in chains, leaping to astound the world . . . (AC, 91).

Thirteen commas strain to contain the form of this breathless sentence. The process of discarding

¹⁴³ Cited by Kendal Thomas, 58.

categories is, for Rufus, a terrible and bloody revolution, a transition full of blood, murder and chaos that anticipates his descent into the literal abyss of the river. The apocalyptic scene parallels Vivaldo's epiphany, which strikes him as he sits dejected in a bar:

And something in him was breaking; he was, briefly and horribly, in a region where there were no definitions of any kind, neither of colour, nor of male and female. There was only the leap and the rending and the terror and the surrender. And the terror: which all seemed to begin and end and begin again--forever--in a cavern behind the eye (AC, 297).

The scene is Baldwin's most explicit description of the destruction of all identity categories. Like Sartre's Roquentin who experiences a state where "[t]hings have broken free from their names," Vivaldo briefly and "horribly" glimpses a state unfettered by definitions of race, gender or sexuality.¹⁴⁴ But if Baldwin's aim is to offer the hope of shedding limiting identity categories, why is this moment full of terror and anguish? And what use is such an insight

if no one else is touched by it? As Vivaldo drinks in [black] Harlem, the "width of the bar" is described as "but a weak representation of the great gulf fixed between them"; a gulf that cannot be surmounted (AC, 69). Vivaldo's relationship with Ida meant that the "blacks now suspected him of being an ally," but Baldwin emphasises that he could never be a "a friend." In fact, he is now stranded, like Rufus, between mid and up town for "the whites knew he could not be trusted" (AC, 294).

Vivaldo's displacement in the space between black and white is crucial to Baldwin's vision in *Another Country*. Like Rufus, Vivaldo experiences the sensation of being located in the gap between opposing sites, straddling the boundaries. Crucially, Vivaldo does not simply transcend racial politics, but suffers in what Baldwin explicitly terms as "the chaos at his centre" (AC, 300). Although Baldwin seems to suggest that this space, in its ability to break free from all categories parallels the creative potential of LeRoi Jones's "no-man's land," it is also, in its terror and chaos, symptomatic of the abject: what Kristeva also refers to as the position of the "frontierman" and

¹⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick [1938] (London: Penguin, 1965), 180. Roquentin, like Vivaldo, feels "crushed" by his epiphany (182).

"borderlander."¹⁴⁵ The references both to Rufus's literal abyss ("He was black and the water was black") and Vivaldo's "cavern" are strongly reminiscent of the image of the abject that I discussed in Chapter One. In particular the abyss in *Another Country* is redolent with the opposing forces of attraction and repulsion that Gross outlines, what she calls "the locus of the subject's generation and the place of its potential obliteration."¹⁴⁶

In *Another Country*, not only is Rufus attracted by the abyss of the river (and in particular to its blackness), but he is repelled by fear, and yet desires to die. More importantly still, is Gross's emphasis on the locus as both the site of the "subject's generation" (Vivaldo's transcendence of categories), but also the "place of potential obliteration" (the terror of no place). In *Another Country*, Baldwin's ambiguity stems from this very repulsion and attraction to chaos. A chaos that has the potential to liberate subjects from rigid identity

¹⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 54, 55. Kristeva emphasises the abject's uncertain relationship to boundaries; it is defined by "[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4), characterised by the "uncertainty of his borders" (63).

¹⁴⁶ Cited by Cora Kaplan, "'A Cavern Opened in My Mind': The Poetics of Homosexuality and the Politics of Masculinity in James Baldwin," *Representing Black Men*, ed. Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 39.

categories, but also obliterates subjectivity: the abject, whose objectivity and subjectivity cannot be distinguished.

Conclusion

Vivaldo's journey in *Another Country* leads him, at the end of the novel, to the realisation that:

black coffee was not black, but deep brown. Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night, not even mines. And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hints of its origins, in fire (AC, 419-20).

Finally, having suffered, Baldwin suggests that Vivaldo has understood the contingency of racial difference. By eschewing the "blackness of blackness," Vivaldo moves from an essentialist notion of race towards an understanding of how colour is constructed. But if Baldwin intended this scene to mark Vivaldo's understanding of race, then it is not clear what purpose this will serve. If it is a final resolution, then it comes too quickly after the novel has confronted barrier after barrier. There is Vivaldo's acknowledgement that he cannot consider his feelings

for Ida without considering her blackness; there is the liberal anxiety that he may not love her, but cannot entertain this, again because of her blackness (AC, 292). And there is Ida's uninterrogated lament that she wished she had remained "[d]own there in the jungle, black and funky--and myself" (AC, 404). Whilst critics have argued that Baldwin increasingly rejected categories that divide us, this is less clear in *Another Country*. Rather, as Corber has noted, Baldwin could equally be saying that "racial and other differences are a permanent fixture of America's multicultural landscape and can never be transcended."¹⁴⁷

But if Baldwin is uncertain about the ability of people to transcend racial difference, what hope, if any, does he give? Although love, as many critics have pointed out, is suggested as a social panacea, Ida's rebuttal to Vivaldo that "[o]ur being together doesn't change the world" lances the bubble of romantic optimism. For Ida, "[l]ove doesn't have as much to do with it as everybody seems to think. . . . it doesn't change everything, like people say" (AC, 340).¹⁴⁸ If heterosexual love is not a social agent, then does

¹⁴⁷ Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, 189.

¹⁴⁸ See Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," [1961] *Nobody Knows*, where Baldwin says "love . . . was over" (182).

Baldwin suggests that bisexual love has the power to affect radical change?

In *Another Country*, Baldwin makes a clear distinction between gay and bisexual desire. As in so much of his fiction, the homosexual underworld is made up of "ignorant armies," Baldwin's earlier title for *Another Country*; they are "fathers, gangsters, football players, rovers," men who did not "make love," but hid from their desires, surrendering to furtive fumbblings in closeted rooms (AC, 209). Like all Baldwin protagonists, Eric does not inhabit the gay subculture, shunning guffawing "birds of paradise," and the "cemetery" of a gay bar (AC, 209, 327). In contrast to what is seemingly presented by Baldwin as the sterile stasis of homosexuality, bisexuality offers the possibility of a fluid desire; a desire symbolically represented by the transformation of Eric's wedding rings into cufflinks for Rufus, then earrings for Ida. Bisexual love also operates indirectly across social, politic and racial axes.

As a young boy in Alabama, Eric experiences his first two loves with African-American men, suggesting that Eric's sexuality enables him to be more open to issues of race. Eric, the reader learns, owns a copy of *Native Son*, and his first homoerotic encounter

occurs with an African-American servant who tends the furnace, the site in Wright's novel where Mary Dalton's mutilated body is disposed of. By transforming the site of the furnace from violence to desire, Baldwin offers an alternative vision to Wright's.

Baldwin's development of bisexuality in *Another Country* suggests, as Susan Feldman has noted, that the author "does not conceive of identity in terms of essence." Feldman convincingly argues that the figuration of bisexuality offers a model for Baldwin's belief in identity because "it registers contingency at the heart of identity, and demands that we note the disjunctions among past, present, and future possibilities."¹⁴⁹ Feldman's point serves to illuminate the important love-making between Eric and Vivaldo. As Eric makes love to Vivaldo, the latter imagines that he is both making love to Rufus, and also that he is Rufus, making love to Eric. As Cohen states, "[t]his sexual connection generates an orgasmic concatenation of identities, whereby Vivaldo conceives of himself as simultaneously gay and straight, male and female, white and black."¹⁵⁰ Vivaldo's lovemaking with Eric mimetically and posthumously reproduces the love that

¹⁴⁹ Feldman, 98.

Rufus desired from Vivaldo. But why does Baldwin suggest that gay male desire can only be mediated indirectly to Rufus via Eric? Why is the novel's protagonist, mediator and even saviour, coded as white and male? And if, as Cohen asks, the scene between Vivaldo and Eric does in fact trample down binaries and barriers, "where does this disintegration lead?"¹⁵¹

One of the main problems of decoding Baldwin's message in *Another Country*--if indeed there is one--is that Baldwin seems so ambivalent himself. In particular, Baldwin seems to be both drawn to and repelled by chaos: a space between boundaries that potentially offers a repudiation of identity categories. The novel is replete with descriptions of the ineffable: terrors that lie buried, all the more frightening because they are "inexpressible" (AC, 196). Eric's relationship with the black LeRoi is "something unspeakable," something "he could not, to save his soul, have named," just as he later feels "unnamed forces within himself" (AC, 202, 234). Both Eric and Cass fear the "unanswerable and unimaginable riddles," as they meet beneath an "unreadable" canvas that conveys "unspeakable chaos" (AC, 287, 396). What is happening to Cass, Eric suggests, is "unspeakable,"

¹⁵⁰ Cohen, 212.

recalling Ida's singing, which "no one has been able to name . . ." (AC, 250, 396).

The references to Eric, it might be reasonably argued, refer to his "unnameable" sexuality, but given the character's centrality and Baldwin's dislike of the words homosexual/ bisexual, this explanation falls short. Linguistically Baldwin might be attempting to depict the chaos between signifier and signified; or the chaos--the midway point--that lies between utterance and meaning. The references to "unnameable" things are in fact symptomatic of Baldwin's own ambivalence. An ambivalence between his earlier statement that "the only real concern of the artist, [is] to re-create out of the disorder of life that order which is art," and a recognition that narrative cannot but smooth over the insistent chaos.

This process is represented in *Another Country* through Vivaldo's attempts to write a novel, to make sense of the chaos around him. Vivaldo's tormented attempts to write a story are contrasted with Richard, who publishes a successful pot-boiled detective story. The two writers are mostly acutely contrasted by their relationship to form. Richard wants to use the established genre of the murder story, to do

¹⁵¹ Cohen, 212.

"something serious within the limits of the form" (AC, 82). He is criticised by Cass and Vivaldo, not because his novel is commercially successful, but because he will not confront the chaos within: he is "afraid of things dark, strange, dangerous, difficult and deep," and the result is a book that "would never mean anything to anyone" (AC, 116, 159). In contrast to his old teacher, Vivaldo's book grapples with the things that Richard's avoids; but the result is a typewriter that will only produce "hieroglyphics" (AC, 137). Vivaldo struggles to move from incoherent symbols to narrative because he cannot decode the "nameless things" that have taken over his mind (AC, 295). It is only at the end of the novel, when his idealism has been shattered, that the narrative coheres (AC, 417).

The act of writing functions as a crucial paradigm in *Another Country*. Vivaldo's narrative requires constant re-building, re-writing, creating its own form. There is also the suggestion that the relationship between Vivaldo and his former teacher, Richard, mirrors the relationship between Baldwin and his former mentor, Richard Wright. One of Baldwin's main criticisms of Wright and the genre of protest fiction was that it was encumbered by its need to adhere to the same form, a point that Baldwin

explained, in somewhat abstract terms, in "Everybody's Protest Novel:"

We take our shape, it is true, within
and against that cage or reality
bequeathed us at our birth. . . .
Society is held together by our need; we
bind it together with legend, myth,
coercion, fearing that without it we
will be hurled into that void. . . .
From this void--ourselves--it is the
function of society to protect us; but
it is only this void, our unknown
selves, demanding forever, a new act of
creation, which can save us. . . . With
the same motion, at the same time, it is
this towards which we endlessly struggle
and from which, endlessly, we struggle
to escape.¹⁵²

This paradox is at the heart of *Another Country*.
Society, Baldwin, infers, protects us from the void,
the darker secrets of the self; but it is only from
this void, this abyss, that we can recreate ourselves,
saving us from the prison-like rigidity of society. In
Another Country, this thesis is paralleled by Vivaldo
who understands that it is only in the "void,"
where "the raw unformed substance of the creation of

¹⁵² Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes*, 25-6.

Vivaldo" lives, that he "could master it" (AC, 300, 301).

Vivaldo's epiphany is echoed elsewhere by Baldwin who writes that "[t]o become a Negro man, let alone a Negro artist, one had to make oneself up as one went along."¹⁵³ To do so, Baldwin infers, is to resist the white world's definitions, as Baldwin warns his young nephew in *The Fire Next Time*: "The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you" (FNT, 16). Rufus's death, Baldwin suggests, happened because he was no longer able to read his own details and symbols, blinded and engulfed by white definitions. He became the black rapist, the degenerate beggar. Eric, on the other hand, survives because he is able to re-create himself:

There were no standards for him except those he could make for himself. There were no standards for him because he could not accept the definitions, the hideously mechanical jargon of the age (AC, 211).

But if both Eric and Vivaldo are able, as white men, to define themselves, Baldwin offers little hope for

¹⁵³ James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," *Nobody Knows*, 189.

black subjectivity. There is Peter in the short story "Previous Condition" who struggles as an out of work actor, only receiving work as an intellectual Uncle Tom. He turns down a stage production of *Native Son* on the grounds that it is typecasting, mirroring Baldwin's repudiation of Wright's work as an authentic expression of black male subjectivity.

Although Baldwin suggests that acting or re-creating the self is a necessary strategy for survival, he is careful to make a distinction between those forced to adopt roles, and those who choose them. Here Baldwin's distinction is usefully informed by Anatole Broyard's essay, "Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro" (1950). Broyard hypothesized that the African-American was "adrift without a role in a world predicated on roles;" forced to perform a multiplicity of roles to mitigate racism, the "true self" was no longer distinguishable from a performance.¹⁵⁴ Similarly, Baldwin wrote that "[a]ll roles are dangerous," warning that "it is always extremely hard--to maintain a kind of watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be

¹⁵⁴ Anatole Broyard, "Portrait of the Inauthentic Negro," *Commentary* (July 1950): 63.

and oneself as one actually is."¹⁵⁵ It was, Baldwin recalled, the "the endless and sinister variations on the role which they had assigned me," that had caused him to leave New York.¹⁵⁶

Rufus, it could be argued, is Baldwin's fictional testament to what he might have become, had he remained in New York; if, like Rufus, he had taken on the "sinister variations on the role" which was placed on him. Rather than suggesting that all categories should be dismantled, Baldwin explores, in *Another Country*, a vision of identity that is endlessly recreated; never static, never fixed. Just as Brooklyn Bridge, described in the opening ceremony as a monument that "looks like a motionless mass of masonry and metal," but is in fact, "an aggregation of unstable elements," Baldwin's narrative does not attempt to rupture categories so much as point to their fluidity.¹⁵⁷ No where is this more clearly articulated than in the description of Ida's "unnameable" singing. It is a voice that "does not so much leap barriers as reduce them to atoms--while still leaving them standing mightily, where they were" (AC, 250). It is powerful precisely because it is

¹⁵⁵ James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," *Nobody Knows*, 179.

¹⁵⁶ James Baldwin, "Equal in Paris," *Notes*, 138.

"unknowable, not to be articulated;" it "transforms and lays waste and gives life, and kills" (AC, 250).

¹⁵⁷ Cited by Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 123.

CHAPTER FOUR

What's Love Got To Do With It? Tracing the Religious
in Baldwin's Work

If I were really vulnerable, you know, I might . . . try to find that cat . . . the Holy Ghost--the holy who? And this has been believed by millions of people who lived and died by it for two thousand years. And when you attack it you're accused of being blasphemous. I think the legend itself is a blasphemy. What is wrong with a man and a woman sleeping together, making love to each other and having a baby like everybody else?

James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue*

So, in my case, in order to become a moral human being, whatever this may be, I have to hang out with publicans and sinners, whores and junkies, and stay out of the temple where they told us nothing but lies anyway.

James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*

Baldwin's funeral at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine on 8 December 1987 was marked by tributes from such luminaries as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, and William Styron. Baldwin, Morrison stated, "made American English honest," adding that he "gave us undecorated truth." It was Baldwin, Morrison continued, "who gave us the courage to live life in an alien, hostile, all-white geography."¹ Angelou recalled Baldwin as her friend and brother, extolling his capacity to love.² In a fiery eulogy, Baraka remembered Baldwin, not just as a writer, but "a man, spirit, voice--old and black and terrible as that first ancestor." Baldwin, Baraka reminded the congregation, was "God's black revolutionary mouth," a "civil rights leader" who, as much as Malcolm X and Dr. King, "helped shepherd and guide us toward black liberation."³ Finally Styron, whilst confessing that Baldwin's work was at times "flawed," emphasised works such as *The Fire Next Time*, which shook "the conscience of the nation as few

¹ Toni Morrison, "Life in His Language," *New York Times Book Review* (20 December 1987): 27.

² Maya Angelou, "A Brother's Love," *New York Times Book Review* (20 December 1987): 29.

³ Amiri Baraka, "We Carry Him With Us," *New York Times Book Review* (20 December 1987): 27, 29.

literary documents have ever done."⁴ And yet it was Baldwin himself who most moved the congregation. As a recording of Baldwin singing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand, Lead Me On," filled the Cathedral, "it startled the listeners," as David Leeming recalled. "He seemed to be there, still witnessing, and people were moved."⁵

The tributes by Morrison, Angelou, Baraka, and Styron point to the diverse ways in which Baldwin's contributions to American literature have been assessed. For many readers and critics, Baldwin's voice has become synonymous with the literature of black rage and exasperation of the 1960s, a point that I explored in Chapter One. Baldwin's repeated attacks on racism, as Morrison suggests, opened the literary floodgates for a myriad of African-American writers, including Morrison herself. And yet as the political fervour of the 1960s and early '70s diminished, Baldwin's work, as Styron covertly suggests, was greeted with a lukewarm critical reception. More often than not critics pointed to a fading craft that failed to deliver the power of works such as *The Fire Next Time*. As John Wideman noted shortly after Baldwin's

⁴ William Styron, "Jimmy in the House," *New York Times Book Review* (20 December 1987): 30.

⁵ David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A.

death, there was a recalcitrant critical consensus that Baldwin "lost his footing as an artist and simply became a propagandist."⁶

More recently critics have begun to give voice to the silence surrounding Baldwin's sexuality, a point that I examined in my first chapter. As Emmanuel Nelson has rightly pointed out, the tributes by Morrison, Angelou, Baraka and Styron "conveniently forget to mention Baldwin's struggle against sexual fascism and his central place in gay literature."⁷ The silence continued when Chinua Achebe, Michael Thelwell and John Wideman (amongst others) presented papers at the University of Massachusetts to honour and appraise Baldwin's life and work. Aside from Thelwell's murmur that Baldwin spoke about sex and race "openly and honestly," there was no examination of Baldwin's contribution or struggle as a gay writer.⁸ And yet since Nelson's claims in 1992, numerous critics have given voice to Baldwin's depictions of masculinity, bisexuality and homosexuality. In fact, according to Dwight McBride, the editor of a recent collection of

Knopf, 1994), 387.

⁶ John Wideman, "Panel Discussion," *Black Writers Redefine Their Struggle: A Tribute to James Baldwin*, ed. Jules Chametzky (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 66.

⁷ Emmanuel Nelson, "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction," *Journal of American Culture* 14, no. 3 (1991): 95.

⁸ Michael Thelwell, "Panel Discussion," *Black Writers Redefine*

essays on Baldwin, cultural studies has finally enabled us to see Baldwin in his entirety, "locating him not as exclusively gay, black, expatriate, activist, or the like but as an intricately negotiated amalgam of all those things."⁹

Despite McBride's insistence that we have finally understood the composite picture of the many Jimmy Baldwins, one noticeable absence remains. At his funeral in New York, it was Baldwin's own voice, singing a gospel song that reminded the congregation of the importance and centrality of religion in his life and work. And yet Baldwin's haunting reminder of his religious past has gone all but unnoticed. Of eight full-length studies on Baldwin, only one book, published in 1973, seriously considers him as a spiritual/ religious writer.¹⁰ As Michael Lynch, one of the few contemporary critics to focus on Baldwin's theology has repeatedly pointed out, "[i]n spite of the profusion of biblical allusions and Christian symbols and themes throughout Baldwin's writing, the scholarship, aside from brief mention of the residual Christian content in his imagery . . . has offered no

the Struggle, 70.

⁹ Dwight A. McBride, "Introduction: New Approaches to Baldwin," *James Baldwin Now*, ed. McBride (New York & London: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

¹⁰ Stanley Macebuh, *James Baldwin: A Critical Study* (New York: The Third Press, 1973).

sustained treatment of his religious thought or theology."¹¹

Lynch's claim is surprising, given that Baldwin wrote "openly and honestly" about his years as a child preacher and the terrors that he faced as the stepson of a tyrannical and pious preacher. In addition, Baldwin repeatedly referred to himself as a "witness," a term, as Gayle Pemberton has argued, which is "religious at its core."¹² By setting his first two works in the church (*Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*), Baldwin followed a long tradition of African-American narratives that unfolded against the backdrop of Christianity. But whilst Baldwin, at least on the surface, continues this literary tradition, he should also, as Sondra O'Neale points out, "be seen as the last black American writer to exploit as a major theme the black man's relationship with

¹¹ Michael Lynch, "A Glimpse of the Hidden God: Dialectical Vision in Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*," *New Essays on Go Tell it on the Mountain*, ed. Trudier Harris (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

¹² Gayle Pemberton, "A Sentimental Journey: James Baldwin and the Thomas-Hill Hearings," *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, ed. and introd. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 174. Amongst many self-references to witnessing in his work, see: James Baldwin, "No Name on the Street," *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's/ Marek, 1985), where he refers to himself as a "public witness" (513); see also Julius Lester, "James Baldwin--Reflections of a Maverick," *Conversations with Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 225.

Christianity."¹³ By the 1950s, as Trudier Harris has pointed out, religion became less central to African-American writing, concluding that Lorraine Hansberry's play, *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) was "Christianity's last stand" in African-American literature.¹⁴

Similarly, Nathan A. Scott noted in 1967 that whilst religion remained a residual theme in African-American literature, it did not contradict what he saw as an increasing secularity in American letters.¹⁵

This shift toward secularity is most acutely illustrated by the work of Richard Wright, the most famous post-Harlem Renaissance African-American writer, who renounced Christianity in favour of communism and later, existentialism. In his account of *Native Son*, Wright explicitly draws attention to what he sees as the failure of religion, suggesting that Bigger Thomas's demise was exacerbated by the black church's lack of support and influence. Bigger, Wright explains, "had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race;" he lived in a world which "contained no spiritual sustenance," an urban

¹³ Sondra O'Neale, "Fathers, Gods, and Religion: Perceptions of Christianity and Ethnic Faith in James Baldwin," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, ed. Fred Standley and Nancy V. Burt (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988), 140.

¹⁴ Harris, 21.

¹⁵ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Judgement Marked By A Cellar: The America Negro Writer and the Dialectic of Despair," *Denver Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1967): 16-17.

hell in which "God no longer existed as a focal point of men's lives."¹⁶ By the 1960s and '70s, in the face of mounting civil rights tensions, Christianity, as I examined in Chapter One, was increasingly viewed as incompatible with radical politics, not least in the growing move towards Islam and the repudiation of non-violent action.

This thematic shift away from the influence of the black church in African-American literature in part explains the lack of critical interest in Christianity and the black church on Baldwin's life and work. Whilst few critics would deny the continued influence of the black church on Baldwin's cadenced language, this is most often explained simply as a matter of style. Melvin Dixon places emphasis on how Baldwin manipulated "religious expression as a structural device for theme," whilst Harold Bloom concludes that Baldwin was a "post-Christian writer" whose "prophetic stance is not so much religious as aesthetic."¹⁷ Similarly, although Cornel West notes that his essays "are grounded in moralism," he places emphasis on Baldwin's aesthetic mastery of "the

¹⁶ Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," *Native Son*, ed. Arnold Rampersad [1940] (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 513, 520, 521.

¹⁷ Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out of the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 124; Harold Bloom, "Introduction," *James Baldwin: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Bloom

rhythm, syncopation, and appeal of an effective sermon."¹⁸

But it is arguably Baldwin himself who steered readers away from his complicated relationship to Christianity. After his vitriolic attacks on the church, notably in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), Baldwin was seen as a relentless social critic who had moved away from the institution of the church. Melvin Dixon concludes that Baldwin was "more the ironic doubter than devout believer," adding that "he had exchanged the pulpit for the pen, the sermon for the novel and the essay."¹⁹ According to critics such as Craig Werner, Baldwin's later work rejected "purely spiritual approaches to problems," and took up "a perspective stressing social action in the face of an oppressive environment."²⁰ Critics noted not only a "comprehensive secularization" in Baldwin's work, but some began to accuse him of being "secular to his fingertips."²¹

(New York & Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 3.

¹⁸ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 85.

¹⁹ Dixon, 124.

²⁰ Werner, 78.

²¹ Werner, 91; Joseph A. Brown, "'I, John Saw the Holy Number:' Apocalyptic Visions in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Native Son*," *Religion and Literature* 27 (spring 1995): 61.

Amidst the critical silence surrounding the question of whether he was a religious writer or not, Baldwin's own voice, like at his funeral, punctuates and disturbs the established critical corpus. Often the moment is brief and unexpected, diluted and lost amidst Baldwin's own attacks on Christianity and yet it challenges claims that he merely exchanged the pulpit for the pen. Ernest Champion recalls both how Baldwin terrified his students by his blasphemous dismissal of God, but also how on one occasion, he broke down whilst hearing a Gospel choir, unable to remain in the room. "[T]hey are singing my life," Baldwin told Champion, "[t]hat is where it all began."²² Again, in *Rap on Race*, a conversation with Margaret Mead, Baldwin seems wrong-footed by the anthropologist, admitting not only that "religion has always really obsessed" him, but accepting Mead's definition of him as a Christian.²³ *Rap* illustrates the difficulty of locating Baldwin's views on religion, since much of the talk is dominated by his vociferous condemnation of Christianity.

More often than not, Baldwin refuses to answer questions about his own beliefs directly, illustrated

²² Ernest A. Champion, *Mr Baldwin, I Presume: James Baldwin--Chinua Achebe: A Meeting of Minds*, foreword by David Leeming (New York & London: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 28, 100.

by an insightful conversation with the novelist James Mossman who confessed that he had never been able to ascertain whether or not Baldwin was a "religious writer." "Does the concept of God mean something to you," probed Mossman, "[a]re you a believer in any sense, or not?" Baldwin's reply was both revealing and tantalising: "I'm not a believer in any sense which would make sense to any church," Baldwin stated, adding, "any church would obviously throw me out. I believe--what do I believe? I believe in . . . I believe in love . . ." ²⁴ Baldwin's reply is frustratingly evasive, and yet, as my chapter will show, Baldwin's emphasis on love--and in particular the need to remove oneself from institutionalised religion--is a central and important theme throughout his work.

This chapter addresses the theme of religion in Baldwin's work. In a critical era that is dominated--at least in Baldwin studies--on areas such as gender, masculinity and sexuality, might it be that the sophistication of cultural studies is ill-equipped or simply unable to grapple with the religious? In contrast to critics who see a progressive

²³ James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (New York: Dell, 1971), 83, 86; hereafter abbreviated as *R*.

²⁴ James Mossman, "Race, Hate, Sex, and Colour: A Conversation

secularisation in Baldwin's work, this chapter maintains that there is a coherent theological framework beginning and ending with *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*, a point that Baldwin covertly made after the publication of his last novel:

What I've really been feeling is that I've come full circle. From *Go Tell it on the Mountain* to *Just Above My Head* sums up something of my experience--it's difficult to articulate--that sets me free to go some place else.²⁵

At times, as I illustrate, Baldwin vehemently repudiated Christianity, yet the impact of the church never left him. As late as 1985, in the introduction to *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin confessed that "[o]nce I had left the pulpit, I had abandoned or betrayed my role in the community," a clear indication of the church's continued hold on him.²⁶ A closer examination of his "secular" texts, such as *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Baldwin's last book, reveal glimpses, as I later show, of his continued fascination with religion.

with James Baldwin and Colin McInnes," *Conversations with Baldwin*, 48.

²⁵ Mel Watkins, "James Baldwin: Writing and Talking," *New York Times Book Review* 23 (September 1979): 3.

²⁶ Baldwin, "Introduction," *The Price of the Ticket*, xvi; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Price*.

Whilst my broad aim is to emphasise the importance of religion in Baldwin's writing, this chapter locates a coherent theological framework in his work. In so doing I urge the importance of locating Baldwin's views within his Pentecostal background. Not only have few critics tackled the theme of religion in Baldwin's work, but there is no sustained critical examination of Baldwin's relationship to Pentecostalism/ the Holiness Movement (terms that I use interchangeably).²⁷ By locating the specificity of his Pentecostal background, I argue that it is possible to make sense of Baldwin's often vitriolic attacks on Christianity, a theme that has encouraged many critics to view the author as either secular or irreligious.

Pentecostalism, as I argue, has historically been a marginalised denomination that has actively encouraged a move away from traditional Protestantism, seeking a purer or more authentic spirituality. By contextualising Baldwin's anti-institutional views in a Pentecostal framework, I show that Baldwin, whilst rejecting religion (the institution) maintained the importance of spirituality, something not predicated

²⁷ See Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (1979; reprint with a new preface by Anderson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1992),

or even enabled by the structure of the church. Thus, whilst Sondra O'Neale rightly concludes that "one cannot ascertain whether or not Baldwin is a 'religious' writer because his works do not reflect the traditional treatment of Christianity in black American literature," a fuller understanding of Pentecostalism's deliberate move away from the tradition of the black church illuminates Baldwin's views.²⁸

1. Baldwin's Pentecostal Past

In her excellent cultural history of the Holiness Movement, *Saints in Exile*, Cheryl J. Sanders notes that despite the plethora of articles on Pentecostalism, most "rely on James Baldwin's masterful description of the conversion of his protagonist, John Grimes in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* as their major source of information about the rituals of the movement."²⁹ Sanders's observation is surprising given the paucity of literary critics who refer to the specificity of Baldwin's Pentecostal past. In fact,

where the author notes "the paucity and unavailability of source materials" on Pentecostalism (xii).

²⁸ O'Neale, 126.

²⁹ Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African-American Religion and Culture* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 49.

aside from David Bergman's brief discussion of Pentecostalism in his excellent chapter, "The Agony of Gay Black Literature," few if any critics distinguish Baldwin's Pentecostalism from the broader term of Protestantism.³⁰

Baldwin's involvement with Pentecostalism began in his early teenage years when he accompanied friends to Mother Rosa Horne's Mount Calvary Assembly of the Pentecostal Faith of All Nations. Previously, as James Campbell notes, Baldwin had attended various Baptist churches with his father, including the famous Abyssinian Baptist Church on 138th Street, run by the notorious preacher and congressman, Adam Clayton Powell. After a short spell at Mother Horne's church, Baldwin moved with his friends to the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly, where, at the age of fourteen, he became "a Holy Roller Preacher."³¹ Whilst Baldwin famously referred to his vocation in *The Fire Next Time* as a "gimmick," in his last published essay, "To Crush the Serpent," Baldwin made no attempt to mask

³⁰ David Bergman, "The Agony of Gay Black Literature," *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representations in American Literature* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 163-87. Two exceptions are, James S. Tinney, "The Blackness of Pentecostalism," *Spirit* 3 no. 2 (1979) where he notes that "Pentecostalism is an important part of James Baldwin's own past" (28). See also Sanders, who notes that Baldwin's "relevance to this discussion [Pentecostalism] is his deep rootedness and rejection of the Sanctified Church" (111).

³¹ James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 9, 10.

the sincerity of his early years. Noting that "the depth of his [a young minister's] faith is a mighty force," Baldwin recalled that when he was in the pulpit, he "believed."³²

By moving from Baptist to Pentecostal churches, Baldwin turned from what has historically been a mainstream African-American practice to a marginalised form of worship.³³ Although Joseph Washington has argued that African-Americans "have never been included in the mainstream of American Protestantism," Pentecostalism, as Sanders notes, has historically been greeted with "suspicion and disapprobation."³⁴ In contrast to the historically mainstream denominations of Methodism and Baptism, Pentecostalism, as Sanders notes, was expelled from the Baptist church at the turn of the century.³⁵

The reasons for Pentecostalism's expulsion from mainstream African-American worship are various. One major factor was the Pentecostal belief, not only in

³² James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* [1963] (London: Penguin, 1964), 29; hereafter abbreviated as *FNT*; James Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent," *Playboy* 34 (July 1987): 66-8.

³³ For a useful account of why most African-American have historically been Methodist and Baptist, see Bryan R. Washington, "Methodists and Baptists," *Black Sects and Cults* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 36-57; see also David W. Wills, "Exodus Piety: African American Religion in and Age of Immigration," *Minority Faiths and the Protestant Mainstream*, ed. Jonathan Sarna (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 116-188.

³⁴ Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 163; Sanders, 96.

glossolalia and xenoglossy but also in the power of the holy spirit to heal the sick, a practice that led to charges of paganism, heathenism and even heresy.³⁶ In a number of social histories of African-American religion, including E. Franklin Frazier's influential *The Negro Church in America* (1964), Pentecostalism is listed variously under "Negro Cults in the City," and "Organized Religion and the Cults."³⁷ Mother Horne in particular, as Frazier notes, was notorious for her claims of not only healing the blind but for raising thousands of people from the dead.³⁸

A second important factor in Pentecostalism's exclusion from mainstream Protestantism is in the Holiness Movement's use of unofficial "storefront" churches and their acceptance of untrained ministers, many of whom, as Frazier notes, were accused of being "exploiters and charlatans."³⁹ Not only was the congregation largely working class, but Pentecostalism

³⁵ Sanders, 16.

³⁶ For a useful account of these terms, see Anderson, 16-19.

³⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), 61; Miles Mark Fischer, "Organized Religion and the Cults," *African American Religious History: Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Scott (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999), 464-72.

³⁸ Frazier, 61; for a brief mention of Mother Horne, see also Fischer, 467. See also Fern Marja Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1968), where she spells it without the final "e" (70).

³⁹ Frazier, 54; see Langston Hughes, *Tambourines to Glory, Five Plays By Langston Hughes*, ed. and introd. Webster Smalley [1949] (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968); the two main characters, Laura and Essie, start a church explicitly to make

encouraged the participation of women and children, leading to a class division between store-front and more respectable "official churches."⁴⁰ Thus, Joseph Washington writes disapprovingly of "a membership that is less than lower-class in status, with untrained charlatans for leaders, and worshippers who do not only 'shout' but speak in strange 'tongues.'"⁴¹

Whilst critics of Pentecostalism have historically attempted to ostracise them from mainstream Protestantism, the Holiness Movement in fact sought exile from mainstream religious life. According to Zora Neale Hurston, the Sanctified Church was a "protest" against the emphasis on wealth and money in the rising black middle-class churches.⁴² As Sanders notes, the early Pentecostal churches, formed at the turn of the century, "'came out' of the mainline black denominational churches and sought 'the deeper life of entire sanctification' and Spirit Baptism."⁴³ Like Baptists, but unlike mainstream Protestantism, the Holiness movement placed emphasis, not on religion mediated through the preacher, but on

money (191); see also Buddy who states that "[t]his church racket's got show business beat to hell" (210).

⁴⁰ Sanders, 17.

⁴¹ Joseph Washington, 115.

⁴² Zora Neale Hurston, "The Sanctified Church," *The Sanctified Church*, foreword by Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Marlowe & Co., 1981), 103.

⁴³ Sanders, 4.

"a full, immediate, emotional, inward experience . . . with God."⁴⁴ In so doing, as Robert Anderson has noted, "[t]he Pentecostals created a kind of anti-Establishment Protestantism that was anti-clerical, antitheological, antilurgical, antisacramental, antiecclesiastical, and indeed, in a sense, antireligious."⁴⁵ In relation to Baldwin, as my subsequent sections examine, the Saints' dialectical identity of "being in the world, but not of it," is often explained through the paradigm of exile, a dominant theme in Baldwin's writing.⁴⁶ In Pentecostalism, this ideology can be viewed as exilic, as Sanders explains, by "the connection made between the saints' rejection of the world and the world's rejection of the saints."⁴⁷

Whilst my aim is not to enter into theological debates concerning the intricacies of the Holiness Movement, Pentecostalism is marked by two important themes. First, as mentioned, the Pentecostal Movement was an attempt "to preserve or restate what was believed to be the old-time religion, and as such it

⁴⁴ Bryan Washington, 63; for a comparison with Baptists, see 41.

⁴⁵ Anderson, 214.

⁴⁶ See William Wasserstrom, "James Baldwin: Stepping Out of the Promise," *Black Fiction: New Studies in the Afro-American Novel Since 1945*, ed. A. Robert Lee (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980), who states that Baldwin "cast the whole enterprise of expatriation into the discourse of spiritual exercise" (90).

⁴⁷ Sanders, 63.

was an authentic expression of that older, folkish culture."⁴⁸ According to Hurston, Pentecostalism was not, as many claimed, "a new religion," but "the older forms of religious expression asserting themselves against the new."⁴⁹ As far as Baldwin is concerned, this movement away from an established church institution is fundamental to his emphasis on personal salvation that need not be mediated through the institution of the church. In addition, Baldwin's work most closely approximates a Christocentric view of Christianity, a theme that characterises the Holiness Movement.⁵⁰

The deliberate movement away from established Protestant traditions to an "old-time religion" characterises Pentecostalism as both a new and an ancient form of worship. Historically, the formal birth of Pentecostalism is marked by the Azusa Street revivals of 1906, an event which precipitated the formation of the Holiness Church.⁵¹ And yet Pentecostalism, according to a number of critics, in its attempts to rescue a more authentic religion, can be traced to much older African religions. Hurston famously claimed that the Pentecostal church was an

⁴⁸ Anderson, 7.

⁴⁹ Hurston, "The Sanctified Church," *The Sanctified Church*, 103.

⁵⁰ Sanders, 137.

attempt to reintroduce an earlier African religion that was lost during slavery.⁵² Like Hurston, James Tinney, argues that Pentecostalism shares at least four distinct Africanisms in worship: "the congs, the dance, the percussion, and the tongue-speaking."⁵³ In fact, according to Tinney, not only do "few [theologians] express doubt about the Blackness of Pentecostalism," but "nowhere is there a religion [Pentecostalism] which is as truly Afro-American as this."⁵⁴

Despite Tinney's indefatigable defence of Pentecostalism's Africanicity, historians have been divided on the question of whether African cultural traits survived the legacy of slavery. Bryan Washington, for example, disputes the claims of a "uniquely African mode of worship," arguing that black Pentecostal services closely mirror those of white Holiness practices.⁵⁵ Franklin Frazier likewise concludes that it is "impossible to establish any continuity between African religious practices and the Negro church in the United States." And yet, whilst his conclusion is more cautious than Hurston's claim

⁵¹ For a detailed account of the revivals, see Anderson (66-71).

⁵² Hurston, "The Sanctified Church," *The Sanctified Church*, 105-6.

⁵³ Tinney: 31; see also where he notes that "James Baldwin calls the drum the indispensable element in Pentecostal religion, the same as in African religion" (32).

⁵⁴ Tinney: 28.

that "shouting is a survival of the African 'possession' by the gods," he concedes that it "most likely reveal[s] a connection with the African background."⁵⁶

Whilst the origins of shout songs/ ring shouts are contested, their central place in the Holiness movement and their impact on black culture is not denied. In fact, according to critics such as Sterling Stuckley, ring shouts and shout songs are not only fundamental to jazz, but they have "continued to form the principal context in which black creativity has occurred."⁵⁷ Like Stuckley, Washington places great emphasis on how Pentecostalism "revolutionize[d] black religious music" by incorporating the secular sounds of blues and jazz into their services.⁵⁸ Echoing Washington, Hurston noted that the Holiness movement was "a revitalizing element in Negro music." In fact, according to Hurston, it was often difficult to distinguish between a jazz performance and a Pentecostal service.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Bryan Washington, 74, 75.

⁵⁶ Frazier, 6, 13; Hurston, "Shouting," *The Sanctified Church*, 91; see also Jon Michael Spenser, "The Ritual of Testifying in the Black Church," *Celebrations of Identity: Multiple Voices in American Ritual Performance*, ed. Pamela R. Frese, foreword by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (London & Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 61-73, esp. 71-3 on "The Meaning of Shouting."

⁵⁷ Cited by Sanders, 13.

⁵⁸ Bryan Washington, 77-80.

⁵⁹ Hurston, "The Sanctified Church and the Jook," *The Sanctified Church*, 136.

Hurston's observation points to the Holiness Movement's complicated relationship to blues and jazz. For whilst the shout song may be evidence of surviving African traits, it also a central component of jazz and blues, a medium historically rejected by the Holiness Movement for being too secular. The anthropologist Morton Marks, for example, has argued that the entranced performances of soul singers such as Aretha Franklin and James Brown are virtually indistinguishable from the "shouts" in church services.⁶⁰ In addition, as I discuss in more detail below, many of the most influential jazz artists, such as John Coltrane and Ray Charles not only grew up in the Sanctified tradition, but forged a new hybrid between the secular world of jazz and the spirituality of Pentecostalism. One notable example is Baldwin's own song at his funeral, "Take My Hand Precious Lord," which was written by Thomas A. Dorsey, who pioneered the crossover from blues to gospel.⁶¹

The Holiness Movement's ambiguous attitude towards jazz and blues is illustrated by their simultaneous acceptance and repudiation of secular music. On the one hand, as Baldwin explores in both *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*, jazz is

⁶⁰ Sanders, 81.

deemed unholy and prohibited, yet historically, the Holiness Movement was the first black Protestant denomination to employ the "tools of the devil," (the horn, piano, tambourine and drum) into their service.⁶² The links between Pentecostalism and jazz are also evident in the form of worship. Not only are ministers encouraged to extemporize, rather than prepare their sermons, but preaching in the Holiness Churches is viewed as a climatic "performance," a point made derisively by Joseph Washington, who observes that the Pentecostal services are "a time of carelessness, like that which comes over participants in a jazz session who are caught up in the rhythm . . ."⁶³

The Pentecostal church's ambiguous views on jazz are paralleled by their contradictory views on sexuality. On the one hand, as various critics have pointed out, Pentecostalism--and in particular the Fire-Baptised Churches--are noted for their puritanical views governing sexual relations, a theme that Baldwin explores in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*

⁶¹ Sanders, 79.

⁶² Sanders, 80; for a brief but useful overview on the historical debates between sacred and secular music, see Saadi A. Simawe, "What is in a Sound? The Metaphysics and Politics of Music in *The Amen Corner*," *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 12-32, esp. 25-9.

⁶³ Sanders, 56; Joseph Washington, 120.

through his phrase of "walking disorderly."⁶⁴ And yet, as Robert Anderson has cogently argued, whilst the Holiness Church is noted for its "preoccupation with sexual mores," it has also been accused of believing that "'sins of the flesh' glorified God because they gave him an opportunity to manifest his grace--a belief that allegedly led to 'free love.'"⁶⁵ Likewise, Washington notes that Pentecostalism has been characterised by an emphasis on "eroticism," adding that "sexual exhibitions stimulated religious enthusiasms and religious excitement was strengthened through sexual activity."⁶⁶ This contradiction, I argue, is central to Baldwin's exploration of the relationship between sexual and religious communion, where the church becomes not just a site of sexual prohibition, but a place that mediates sexual encounters.

My aim here is not to oversexualise the African-American concept of "soul," a point that the critic Amitai Avi-Ram has warned against, but to stress that the Puritan strictures of Pentecostalism are not as straightforward as they appear.⁶⁷ As I noted in Chapter

⁶⁴ Anderson, 160.

⁶⁵ Anderson, 159.

⁶⁶ Bryan Washington, 63.

⁶⁷ Amitai F. Avi-Ram, "The Unreadable Black Body: 'Conventional' Poetic Form in the Harlem Renaissance," *Genders* 7 (spring 1990): 37; for a useful overview, see Bergman, esp. 172-176.

One, critics such as Avi-Ram and Michael Dyson have made the point that African-American religious beliefs do not always reflect the Western dualism of body and soul.⁶⁸ Rather than polarizing the body and the spirit, Avi-Ram notes that "one tends to find a smooth continuity between body and soul," a point echoed by Michael Ventura who notes that black culture has "transcended the split between mind and body inherited from Descartes and certain forms of Christian theology."⁶⁹ In the case of Pentecostalism, a religion that most closely retains its African heritage, there is, as some critics argue, not only less of a division between the spirit and the flesh, but more specifically, an acceptance between Africanisms and homosexuality.⁷⁰

As I examine below, this fusion of sacred and secular is keenly illustrated in the birth of soul music in the early 1960s where songs such as Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing," and Aretha Franklin's "Spirit in the Dark," evince what Andrew Ross has referred to as soul's fusion of "God and sex."⁷¹ In relation to

⁶⁸ See Michael Eric Dyson, "When You Divide the Body and Soul, Problems Multiply: The Black Church and Sex," *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Massachusetts, etc.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Inc., 1996), 77-108. Dyson focuses on the physicality of black worship, calling for a "theology of eroticism."

⁶⁹ Avi-Ram: 36; cited by Dyson, 92.

⁷⁰ Bergman, 172-83.

⁷¹ See E. Patrick Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark:

Baldwin, Joseph Brown, responding to criticism that Baldwin has "secularized images from the Pentecostal church," makes the point that such dichotomies, between the sacred and the secular, were "not true in those traditional African religions which profoundly influence African diasporic culture."⁷²

2. Baldwin's Personal Theology

In the following section I argue that despite Baldwin's contradictory views on the black church and more generally on Christianity, it is possible to trace in his writing what I term "a coherent personal theology." Taking lead from Michael Lynch's pioneering work, I argue that Baldwin's theology "develops more as a corrective to than a repudiation of Christian theology as understood and practised." Like Lynch I agree that Baldwin's personal theology "might be called 'radical' in the sense of being faithful to the spirit of the early church," a fundamental tenet that I have outlined in *Pentecostalism*.⁷³ In tracing Baldwin's unfurling personal theology, I focus on four

Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community," *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 399-416; Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 98.

⁷² Brown: 65.

⁷³ Michael Lynch, "Just Above My Head: James Baldwin's Quest For

main areas, drawing from a variety of Baldwin's fiction and non-fiction. First, I locate Baldwin's critique of the white church in a historical context. Second, I examine Baldwin's criticism of the black church's lack of love and what Baldwin sees as a negation of agency. Third, I examine Baldwin's call for Christianity to return to what Lynch terms "the spirit of the early church." This in turn, I argue, is fundamental to Baldwin's harsh critique of the church's suppression of sexual love. In contrast to a number of critics, such as Robert Bone, who have argued that Baldwin elevates homosexuality by equating it with religious conversion, I argue that Baldwin focussed more broadly on the complicated relationship between the Word and the Flesh.

For many critics, Baldwin's virulent and acerbic critique of the white church in *The Fire Next Time* is ample proof of his secular birth. In fact *The Fire Next Time* has been instrumental, not only in perpetuating Baldwin's secular image, but in precipitating a revision of his earlier work. As Rolf Lunden has insightfully pointed out, critics repeatedly failed to interpret *Go Tell it on the*

Mountain as an indictment of Christianity or an ironic commentary until the publication of *Fire* in 1963.⁷⁴

The influence of *Fire* on Baldwin's earlier works can be attributed to his relentless critique of Christianity, most notably in his splenetic tirades against the hypocrisy of the white church. Whilst Baldwin recalls his conversion with a marked lack of irony, the momentous moment is punctured by an acknowledgement that not even God is free from racial distinction:

But God--and I felt this even then, so long ago, on that tremendous floor, unwillingly--is white. And if His love was so great, and if He loved all his children, why were we, the black, cast down so far? (*FNT*, 34).

By calling attention to the historical inequality of suffering between white and black Christians, Baldwin anticipates and feeds into the work of black humanists who have questioned the appropriateness of theodicy to explain African-American suffering. Paralleling the work of African-American theologians such as William R. Jones, Baldwin vehemently opposes the recalcitrant

⁷⁴ Cited by Barbara Olson, "'Come-to-Jesus Stuff,' in James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*," *African-American Review* 31, no. 2 (1997): 296.

acceptance of "the divine right of suffering."⁷⁵

Writing over twenty years after *Fire* in his last published article, Baldwin again returned to this theme, expressing his "profound and troubled contempt" for white Christians who invoked the curse of Ham to justify slavery.⁷⁶

Baldwin's critique of the white church is also part of a legacy of African-American commentators who, as Cornel West has noted, have been forced to adopt what he terms a "dialectical methodology." By refusing to believe the premises outlined by white theologians, African-Americans have historically "digested, decoded, and deciphered," white Christianity's official line.⁷⁷ Baldwin's early realisation that "the Bible had been written by white men" and that it had been used to justify slavery anticipates the work of African-American theologians such as James Cone, who have forcefully argued that "the white church's involvement in slavery and racism in America simply cannot be overstated" (*FNT*, 38).⁷⁸ Like Cone, Baldwin rails against Christianity's complicity in the

⁷⁵ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist: a Preamble to Black Theology* (1973; reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), xxi.

⁷⁶ Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent:" 66.

⁷⁷ West, 109; see also O'Neale, who locates Baldwin in a tradition of African-American re-interpreters of white Christianity, from mid-eighteenth century Africans to Countee Cullen (127-9).

⁷⁸ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 72.

mechanisms of slavery and colonialism, arguing vehemently that "[t]he spreading of the Gospel . . . was an absolutely indispensable justification for the planting of the flag" (FNT, 45). For Baldwin, armed with the knowledge of (white) Christianity's dubious history, his position as a minister became increasingly problematic. "[I]t began to take all the strength I had not to stammer, not to curse," Baldwin recalled, "not to tell them [the congregation] to throw away their Bibles and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike" (FNT, 40).

Baldwin's criticism of the church implicitly attacks what James Cone terms the "white lie" of Christianity. By persuading slaves that "life on earth was insignificant because obedient servants of God could expect a 'reward' in heaven after death," the (white) church was complicit in attempts to deter and contain black insurrection and rebellion.⁷⁹ But Baldwin was also increasingly dismissive of what he saw as the black church's ineffectuality, a criticism that parallels his growing disillusionment with more moderate measures to combat racism. In *Blues For Mister Charlie*, this despair is played out

⁷⁹ Cone, 121.

dramatically by the resignation that racial injustice will "end with the Bible and the gun," a clear indication of the need for direct action.⁸⁰ Despite Baldwin's recollection in *Fire* that he wanted to implore his congregation to drop the bible and become politically engaged, by 1968, in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, the church is seen as politically impotent. In the face of unrelenting racism and brutality, religion is depicted as little more than a lie, illustrated by the desperate curses that so many Baldwin characters utter. In *Another Country*, Rufus, curses God before hurling himself off George Washington Bridge; in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, a beaten and dejected Caleb recalls that he "hated God," and in *Just Above My Head*, God becomes "a very sick dude."⁸¹

Baldwin's continued pillorying of the church's political impotence is surprising given the birth of a progressive black theology in the mid 1960s.⁸² In an

⁸⁰ James Baldwin, *Blues For Mister Charlie* [1965] (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 120.

⁸¹ James Baldwin, *Another Country* [1963] (London: Penguin, 1990), 93; *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* [1968] (London: Penguin, 1994), 56; *Just Above My Head* [1979] (London: Penguin, 1994), 422; hereafter abbreviated as: AC, TMHL, and JAMH.

⁸² For a useful overview of this movement, see Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing a Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), esp. 28-41, 87-124; for the seminal text on black power and religion, see James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* [1969] (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), and also *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia & New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970).

open letter to the *New York Times* in 1966, the newly formed National Committee of Negro Churchmen (N.C.N.C.) openly declared their support for Black Power, insisting, as their chair Gayraud Wilmore later stated, that "the rising crescendo of voices from the pulpit and pew demand that black churchmen re-examine their belief; that unless they begin to speak and act relevantly in the present crisis they must prepare to die."⁸³ Despite the black church's growing political commitment, Baldwin critiqued its effectiveness, insisting that, since it failed to attract young people, "its social usefulness is at least debatable."⁸⁴

Whilst Baldwin acknowledges that the church gave refuge for people like his father, who, in the face of racism, had no where else to turn, he also suggests that the church, as a place of safety, fosters a tendency towards passivity and a sublimation of individuality (*FNT*, 13).⁸⁵ Thus Caleb in *Tell Me How Long*, having found the Lord, "did not want to be Caleb

⁸³ "Black Power: Statement By National Committee of Negro Churchmen," *New York Times* (31 July 1966): E5; cited by Hopkins, 38. For an acerbic satire on the church's political weakness, see Ben Caldwell, "Prayer Meeting: Or, the First Militant Minister," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 588-94.

⁸⁴ James Baldwin, "How Can We Get Black People to Cool it," *Esquire* 70, no. 1 (July 1968): 52.

⁸⁵ See *The Fire Next Time* where Baldwin states that the real meaning of religion is safety (23).

any more" (*TMHL*, 334). Caleb, like Margaret in *The Amen Corner*, is presented as a shell, a religious automaton whose vitality and individuality has been sucked out by an overbearing institution.

In his last two novels, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin repeatedly criticises those who surrender agency to what is increasingly depicted as an ineffectual religion. In *Beale Street*, when Fonny is falsely accused of rape, his mother, Mrs. Hunt is described as "a Sanctified woman, who didn't smile much, but, still, neither of them acted as if their son were dying."⁸⁶ In contrast to Tish's family who employ a lawyer and steal in order to support Fonny financially, Mrs. Hunt in particular relies only on prayer and refuses to act on his behalf. The result, as Baldwin wryly notes, is that "[b]etween the mother's prayers, which were more like curses, and the sisters' tears, which were more like orgasms, Fonny didn't stand a chance" (*IBSCT*, 49).

Baldwin's critique of the church's tendency towards passivity is played out most poignantly in *Just Above My Head*. When Julia, who is a child preacher, will not allow her dying mother to go to

⁸⁶ James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (London: Penguin,

hospital, believing in the power of the Holy Spirit, Florence takes direct action. Critical of Joel's resignation that the house "was taken over by the Holy Ghost some time ago," Florence insists on the need for agency: "the Holy Ghost don't change the child's diapers, or teach it how to cross the street--!" (*JAMH*, 120).

But it is in *The Amen Corner* that Baldwin most vociferously condemns Margaret's refusal to take responsibility for her actions. Margaret's repeated assertion that her actions are not "hers" but "the Holy Ghost's" are criticised by Baldwin who emphasises the need to take personal responsibility for one's actions.⁸⁷ When Margaret tells her son, David, that he has a "natural gift for music . . .--the Lord give it you," David replies that "[t]he Lord give me eyes, too, Mama, but I still had to go to school to learn how to read" (*TAC*, 36).

In *The Amen Corner*, Baldwin suggests that piety not only leads to passivity, but that it damages personal relationships. This is most explicitly illustrated by Margaret's insistence that the Holy Ghost instructed her to leave her husband, Luke. By

1974), 21; hereafter abbreviated as *IBSCT*.

⁸⁷ James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner* [1955] (London: Penguin, 1991), 33; hereafter abbreviated as *TAC*.

refusing to take responsibility for her actions, Margaret substitutes piety for love, a point that Baldwin draws on in his introduction:

Her [Margaret's] need for human affirmation, and also her vengeance, expresses itself in her merciless piety; and her love, which is real but which is also at the mercy of her genuine and absolutely justifiable terror, turns her into a tyrannical matriarch (*TAC*, 14).

In the *Amen Corner*, Margaret's theological terror has caused her "funny, fast-talking, fiery little self" to rescind into bitterness and unhappiness characterised by her inability to love (*TAC*, 91).

Baldwin's critique of the church's inability to foster love is most explicitly illustrated in *The Fire Next Time*, where he forcefully states: "I really mean that there was no love in the church," adding that it "was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair" (*FNT*, 40). Paralleling his explanation of Margaret's "justifiable terror," Baldwin argues that what little love there is in the church is inauthentic, since it is induced, not by unconditional love, but by fear of a wrathful God: people "ought to love the Lord because they loved Him, and not because they were afraid of going to Hell" (*FNT*, 37). This terror of damnation,

Baldwin contends, in fact obstructs the path to salvation, which "is not precipitated by the terror of being consumed in hell." Rather, for Baldwin, salvation is "accepting and reciprocating the love of God," which leads, not to separation, but to "union."⁸⁸

Baldwin's emphasis on union extends to the role that the church plays in the community. For Baldwin, the black church remains hypocritical, as it is unable or unwilling to extend the message of love to black and white alike. Recalling his indignation at a pastor's command not to give up his chair to a white woman, Baldwin writes despairingly of the church's edict: "what was the point, the purpose, my salvation, if it did not permit me to behave with love towards others, no matter how they behaved towards me?" (*FNT*, 41).

In his last book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Baldwin again returned to this theme, reflecting on how the church had the potential to offer love and support to individuals, only to eject them from the community. In a story, which is worth recounting in brief, Baldwin recollects how Billy, a seventeen-year old member of his congregation had been ostracised by the church, having "backslid," and "gone back into the

⁸⁸ James Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent:" 70.

world." Disobeying the church's injunction not to communicate with Billy, Baldwin recalls his decision with both anger and indignation:

I was acting, after all, on the moral assumptions I had inherited from the community that had produced me. I had been told to *love everybody*.⁸⁹

Baldwin's disobedience of the church elders' edict not to communicate with the "fallen" Billy serves to illustrate the author's exile from the institution of the church. Not only did Baldwin rail against white Christianity, stating that "I became a Christian by not imitating white people," but also all institutionalised religion is viewed as hypocritical and ineffectual (R, 85). Echoing the early Pentecostal ideology, Baldwin told Margaret Mead that "the Christian church is *meaningless*. The *Christian church as church*" (R, 87). In a vehement outburst against the church, Baldwin stressed that "in order to become a moral human being . . . I have to hang out with the publicans and sinners, whores and junkies, and stay out of the temple where they told us nothing but lies anyway" (R, 85-6).

⁸⁹ James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985; reprint, with a foreword by Derrick Bell and Dewart Bell, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 122.

Baldwin's distrust and disillusionment with the institution of the church is illustrated through characters such as Arthur in *Just Above My Head* and Luke in *The Amen Corner* who represent a spiritual authenticity that stems from outside of the church. Yet neither Luke nor Arthur can accurately be described as secular, since both protagonists, who are musicians, suggest a more authentic spirituality through jazz and gospel. By illustrating the power of music, a medium which fosters community in contrast to the stifling division of institutional piety, Baldwin suggests the close relationship between blues, jazz, gospel and spirituality.

As I have noted above, historically there is a close, albeit complex relationship between the Holiness Movement and jazz, a point that Baldwin makes in *The Fire Next Time* in his recollections of preaching: "I would improvise from the texts like a jazz musician improvises from a theme. I never wrote a sermon. . . . You have to sense the people you're talking to. You have to respond to what they hear."⁹⁰ This connection between spirituality and music, according to James Campbell, became a central theme in Baldwin's later years. Campbell notes that whilst

⁹⁰ Jordan Elgrably and George Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction: James

Baldwin "was not a believer in the sense of subscribing to a particular faith, or belonging to a specific church, his life was based on a faith that can only be called religious. . . . His scripture was the old black gospel music."⁹¹

Campbell's observation is corroborated by a striking example of Baldwin's love of the church's music, which pierces the often acerbic prose of *The Fire Next Time*:

The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord (*FNT*, 35-6).

Much has been written on Baldwin's pioneering use of the blues and jazz in language and his repeated references to himself, not as a writer, but as a blues singer. Consider, for example, the plethora of Baldwin's titles that draw on African-American music: *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, *The Amen Corner*, "Sonny's

Baldwin," *Conversations with James Baldwin*, 234-5.

⁹¹ Campbell, 281.

Blues," *Blues For Mister Charlie, If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*. But I am interested here in how Baldwin explores the notion of what Eleanor Traylor has termed the "blues-manhood" in relation to spiritual growth.⁹² In contrast to institutional piety, which he chastises for its emphasis on refuge and safety, jazz and blues, according to Baldwin, can only be truly heard by those who have suffered, illustrated by his essay, "The Use of the Blues." Ray Charles, according to Baldwin, "is a great tragic artist, [who] makes a genuinely religious confession something triumphant and liberating. He tells us that he cried so loud he gave the blues to his neighbor next door."⁹³

Baldwin's commentary on Charles is important as he makes it clear that music is not so much a substitute for religion, but that music is itself a spiritual medium that has the ability to reach out to others. As Saadi Simawe has insightfully pointed out, the "essential similarity between religion and music . . . may indicate that Baldwin had not in fact strayed far from a religion when he replaced it with music."⁹⁴

⁹² Eleanor Traylor, "I Hear Music in the Air: James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, 219.

⁹³ James Baldwin, "The Use of the Blues," *Playboy* (January 1964): 241.

⁹⁴ Simawe, 18. *The Amen Corner* is also dedicated to "Nina [Simone], Ray [Charles], Miles [Davis], Bird [Charlie Parker],

Simawe, however, does not point to the ways in which Baldwin's emphasis on the "religious confession" of Charles is illustrative of the ways in which, by the late 1950s, jazz and blues became increasingly less secular.⁹⁵ Consider, for example titles such as Horace Silver's "The Preacher" (1955), Johnny Griffin's "The Congregation" (1958), Donald Byrd's "Pentecostal Feeling," (1961) or any number of John Coltrane tracks such as "A Love Supreme," "Meditations," or "Ascension."

For some jazz critics, such as Ralph Ellison, this fusion of sacred and secular was too confused. In a letter to Albert Murray in 1958 he berated musicians such as Horace Silver, declaring that they "don't even know the difference between the blues and a spiritual . . ."⁹⁶ Similarly, Big Bill Broonzy, commenting on the work of Ray Charles stated: "He's got the blues. He's crying sanctified. He's mixed the blues with the spirituals. I know that's wrong."⁹⁷ And yet, for many other critics, as Charles Keill has argued, by the 1950s, the bluesman "had come to take on a sacred

and Billie" [Holiday].

⁹⁵ See J.A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home," *The Black Aesthetic*, 108-24; also Peter Labrie, "The New Breed," *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1968), 64-77.

⁹⁶ Albert Murray and John F. Callahan, ed., *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 193-4.

function, almost akin to that of a preacher, in expressing the shared values, heritage and history of the community."⁹⁸

In *The Amen Corner*, Baldwin explores this notion of the bluesman as secular preacher through the figure of Luke, a jazz musician who has been abandoned by his pious preacher wife, Margaret. Whilst Margaret will not accept Luke because he is "worldly," it is Luke who teaches his wife what it means to love. Like the eponymous hero of "Sonny's Blues," Luke's life is characterised by an acceptance of suffering, which he communicates through his music. At the end of the play, Margaret learns to love through Luke, illustrated by her final (improvised) sermon:

Children. I'm just now finding out what it means to love the Lord. It ain't all in the singing and the shouting. It ain't all in the reading of the Bible. It ain't even--it ain't even--in running all over everybody trying to get to heaven. To love the Lord is to love all His children--all of them--everyone!--and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost! (TAC, 131).

⁹⁷ Cited by Labrie, 65.

⁹⁸ Cited by Ross, 73.

Significantly, this is Margaret's final sermon, with the implication that she does not need the church since she has found love, just as Luke no longer needs his music.

Baldwin's emphasis on spirituality outside of the church is central to his personal theology. Whilst his vociferous critiques of Christianity have contributed to a view of him as an increasingly secular writer, a closer examination reveals a move away from religion and a move towards religiosity.⁹⁹ In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin illustrates this through the figure of Florence. Whilst she is both loving and affirmative, she "doesn't like to go to church," since "the people don't have any spirit . . . and they've lost their true religion" (*JAMH*, 8).

For Baldwin, the original spirit of the church has been lost, hijacked by the puritanical fervour of St. Paul who, as Baldwin notes, warned that it is better "to marry than to burn" (*FNT*, 25). In the *Fire Next Time*, Baldwin explicitly inveighs against those Christians who have conveniently forgotten the origins of the early church: "the real architect of the Christian church," Baldwin reminds his readers, "was not the disreputable, sun-baked Hebrew who gave it his

name but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous St. Paul" (*FNT*, 44). Continuing this theme some twenty years later, Baldwin railed against the present-day "Moral Majority" arguing that they "have taken the man from Galilee as hostage. He does not know them and they do not know him:"

Nowhere, in the brief and extraordinary passage of the man known as Jesus Christ, is it recorded that he ever upbraided his disciples concerning their carnality. These were rough, hard-working fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. Their carnality can be taken as given, and they would never have trusted or followed or loved a man who did not know they were men who did not respect their manhood.¹⁰⁰

For Baldwin, Christianity has falsely focussed on what he elsewhere calls the "terrors of the flesh," which have stunted the opportunity for love. In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin examines this condition, observing that:

it is also inevitable that a literal attempt to mortify the flesh should be made among black people like those with

⁹⁹ I use the term "religiosity" to refer to spirituality that is not mediated by an institutional religion.

¹⁰⁰ Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent:" 68.

whom I grew up. Negroes in this country . . . are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world (*FNT*, 30).

In Baldwin's view, the Puritanism of the black church is directly linked to a pathological self-hatred, caused by white society's demonising of the African-American subject. In his recollections of becoming a minister, Baldwin makes this connection explicit. Harlem, as Baldwin recalls, was a place where "the wages of sin were visible everywhere." As a young boy, vulnerable to sexual molestation, Baldwin felt "one of the most depraved people on earth," causing him to flee to the safety of the church (*FNT*, 24, 26). Baldwin's early teenage years, as David Leeming notes, were a period in "which he was to be nearly overwhelmed by sexuality, and, almost at the same moment, religion."¹⁰¹

Baldwin's recollections of his entrance into the ministry illustrate the paradoxical nature of the church. On the one hand, Baldwin is critical of the church's prohibitions of the flesh but he is also deeply aware of the inextricability of the carnal from the spiritual. Recalling his early days as a young preacher, Baldwin notes how he attempted to love his

congregation "more than I would ever love any lover and, so, escape the terrors of this life." But this refuge, Baldwin recalls, was not possible. Aware that his status led others to think of him as a "sexual prize," Baldwin emphasises the carnality of congregations that are made up "of men and women."¹⁰²

Baldwin's insistence on religion's sexual energy is most forcefully illustrated by his initiation into the church. As he joins the charismatic Mother Horne's church, Baldwin is struck by the similarity between the church and the sexual depravity of the streets. Mother Horne's first question, "[w]hose little boy are you?," was, Baldwin recalled, the same question asked by pimps and racketeers. Moving to the church, Baldwin recalls, was "a spiritual seduction," not far removed from the sexual activity of the streets (*FNT*, 32). Even the moment of conversion, as David Leeming notes, led Baldwin "to sense the sexual roots of the terrifying release he had experienced on the church floor as Mother Horne and the saints had labored over him."¹⁰³

By drawing attention to Baldwin's correlation between the Word and the Flesh my argument in part

¹⁰¹ Leeming, 23.

¹⁰² Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent:" 68.

¹⁰³ Leeming, 30.

reflects John Lash's observation that Baldwin swapped the cult of religion for the cult of phallicism. Lash's article maintains that Baldwin, though rejecting the formal strictures of the church, "transfigure[d]" his earlier beliefs into "the fear and admiration and worship of the male sex organ," what Lash terms, "a modern cult of phallicism."¹⁰⁴ However, in contrast to Lash's insistence that he substituted religion for sex, it is evident that Baldwin attempted to co-join the spiritual with the sexual. Whereas Lash concludes that, whilst Baldwin "writes well about sex and he writes well about religion . . . [but] he cannot fuse the two," it is precisely this fusion, this tension between the sexual and the spiritual that Baldwin achieves.

Rather than transfiguring, as Lash contends, the religious into the sexual, Baldwin urges rather for a re-examination of what is generally held sacred (*FNT*, 44). This entails, far from a repudiation of the sacred, a need to accept the sensual side of religion. However, as Baldwin makes clear:

The word "sensual" is not intended to
bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or

¹⁰⁴ John S. Lash, "James Baldwin Beside Himself: A Study in Modern Phallicism," *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Therman O'Daniel (1977; reprint, Washington: Howard University Press, 1981), 48.

priapic black studs. I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the forces of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread (*FNT*, 43).

Baldwin's clarification of the term "sensual" is vital to an understanding of his personal theology. As I illustrate in the next section, Baldwin is highly critical of sexual encounters that are devoid of spirituality. In Baldwin's personal theology, spirituality is not mediated between God and the believer, but through a union, often sexual, between two people. In *Nothing Personal*, Baldwin makes this explicit, emphasising the need to save one another:

I have always felt that a human being could only be saved by another human being. I am aware that we do not save each other very often. . . . And all that God can do, and that I expect him to do, is lend one the courage to continue one's journey and face one's end.¹⁰⁵

In Baldwin's fiction and essays, this message is repeatedly played out, as I explore below. In "To

Crush the Serpent," Baldwin again makes the point that salvation necessitates the interconnection of people, not just an abstract faith between believer and God. Writing that there is "absolutely no salvation without love," Baldwin emphasises that salvation connects, "so that one sees oneself in others and others in oneself."¹⁰⁶

3. In the Beginning was the Word

In the following section I trace Baldwin's examination of religion and spirituality in his fiction. The first part examines *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and the short story, "The Outing," two narratives that are formally located within the arena of the church. In the second section, I turn to Baldwin's last two novels, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*. By juxtaposing Baldwin's early and later work, I show how his views on religion and spirituality developed but retained essential similarities. In contrast to critics who have noted a "secularisation" in his later work, I show that Baldwin retains a deep-rooted emphasis on the need for spiritual growth.

¹⁰⁵ Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," Price, 389.

Although I have stated broadly that my aims are to trace his examination of religion and spirituality, I focus on Baldwin's exploration of religion/spirituality and sexuality in his fiction. My reasons for doing so are threefold. First, the tensions between religion and sexuality are one of the most central themes in Baldwin's work, themes that cohere and illuminate his fiction. Second, Baldwin's critique of the church's division between spirit and flesh is radical in the sense that it attempts to re-define the essence of authentic spirituality. Third, by focussing on this central theme, I show the coherence between Baldwin's reputedly "religious" work (that is, his early fiction) and what has generally been noted as his "secular" work, that is his fiction set outside the boundaries of the church.

Whilst a handful of critics have noted how Baldwin infuses his descriptions of sex with religious language, little work has been done on this important area.¹⁰⁷ Often Baldwin is accused of either confusing homosexuality with religion or of elevating same-sex desire to the ecstasies of religious rapture. Ralph Ellison, for example, commenting on *Go Tell it*,

¹⁰⁶ Baldwin, "To Crush the Serpent:" 70.

¹⁰⁷ See Rosa Bobia, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin in France* (New York, etc.: Peter Lang, 1997), where a French review

bemoaned that Baldwin "doesn't know the difference between getting religion and going homo."¹⁰⁸ Whilst Robert Bone insightfully observes that, in Baldwin's work, "the language of the store-front church persists . . . primarily when he tries to exalt the moment of sexual union," the reasons are left unexplored.¹⁰⁹ Instead, Bone accuses Baldwin of over poeticising homosexuality, endowing it with "mythic significance." Disregarding why Baldwin uses religious language in sexual discourse, Bone writes disparagingly of *Another Country's* Eric as "the high priest of ineffable phallic mysteries," foregrounding Stanley Crouch's conclusion that Baldwin's fiction presents an unconvincing "alternative order in which homosexuals served as priests in a religion based on love."¹¹⁰

In contrast to Bone's insistence that Baldwin proselytises "salvation through sodomy," this chapter agrees with Howard Harper's insistence that Baldwin's work is not "a plea for homosexuality."¹¹¹ Rather, as Harper concludes, it "is the love rather than the sex

of *Go Tell it* refers to the "troubling mixture of sensuality and of religion . . ." (19).

¹⁰⁸ Murray and Callahan, ed., *Trading Twelves*, 43.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (1958; rev. ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 239.

¹¹⁰ Bone, 232, 234; Stanley Crouch, "The Rage of Race," *Notes of a Hanging Judge: Essays and Reviews, 1979-1989* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 235.

¹¹¹ Bone, 238; Howard M. Harper, *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin and Updike* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 157-8.

which is important." And it is love, often sexual, but infused with spirituality that Baldwin insists upon, what he refers to in *Blues For Mister Charlie* as "the holy and liberating orgasm."¹¹²

Looking back on the completion of his first novel, Baldwin recalled that he "had come through something," as he finally finished the project that had taken him ten long years to complete.¹¹³ *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, was Baldwin recalled, an attempt "to re-create the life that I had first known as a child and from which I had spent so many years in flight."¹¹⁴ Baldwin's recollection that he had "come through something" suggests, as Cheryl Sanders has remarked, that the completion of *Go Tell it*, was something akin to the experience of religious conversion: an attempt, both to come to terms with, and to exorcise his Sanctified past.¹¹⁵ In the process of "coming through," a phrase which draws on John's own tortuous salvation

¹¹² Baldwin, *Blues For Mister Charlie*, 105; see also Baldwin, *One Day When I was Lost: A Scenario Based on the Life of Malcolm X* [1972] (New York: Dell, 1992). In a note, Baldwin states that people in this scene should show "the peace which follows an orgasm or a religious conversion" (142).

¹¹³ Leeming, 89.

¹¹⁴ James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What it Means to Be An American," *Nobody Knows My Name* [1959] (London: Penguin, 1991), 18; hereafter abbreviated in the notes as *Nobody Knows*.

¹¹⁵ See Jordan Elgrably and George Plimpton where JB stated that *Go Tell it* was "about my relationship to my father and to the church, which is the same thing really. It was an attempt to exorcise something . . ." (240).

on the threshing floor, Baldwin attempted to lay his past to rest with an earlier draft titled "Crying Holy" (one of the characteristic expressions of the Pentecostal worship experience), followed by three thematically similar short stories:

"In My Father's House," "The Death of the Prophet," and "Roy's Wound."

Whilst the different versions of what would eventually become *Go Tell it on the Mountain* are characterised by a young protagonist's tortuous relationship with his step-father, early readers of Baldwin's most substantial draft, "Crying Holy," noted its explicit homoeroticism. The poet Harold Norse, a friend of Baldwin's from his Greenwich Village days, recalls that "Crying Holy" was not only "beautifully written," but "[i]t was the first time I had seen the subject of homosexuality in a contemporary novel."¹¹⁶ Similarly, Emile Capouya, a school friend of Baldwin's who had also read a similar draft, describes how the original story ended with John saying (in effect) "I want a man."¹¹⁷ Baldwin, according to Norse, was

¹¹⁶ Harold Norse, *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, preface by James Baldwin (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1989), 114.

¹¹⁷ Cited by W.J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (London: Michael Joseph, 1990), 96. The original manuscript is more sexually explicit; see James Baldwin, Typescript of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. c. 1950 (The James Baldwin Collection. MG 278. The Schomburg Center). For example, John is described as "rubbing his hand, before the eyes of Jesus, over his cock" (6).

pessimistic about getting his novel published: "Who'd ever take it? . . . Who wants a novel about a black boy anyway, much less a queer one?"¹¹⁸ Although Baldwin toned down the explicitly homosexual relationship between John and Elisha in *Go Tell it*, it remains as critics have begun to argue, "deeply buried" within the narrative, a point that Baldwin acknowledged, noting that it "is implicit in the boy's situation," and "made almost explicit" in his tentative relationship with Elisha.¹¹⁹

The recent call to re-examine *Go Tell it* as an important early work of black gay fiction is contrasted sharply by the early responses to the novel. Whilst Baldwin was anxious about the novel's homosexual theme, his editors made no mention of this, taking exception instead to what they saw as the excessive religiosity of the novel. William Cole, whilst noting that the "novel [is] rich and poetic," reported that "[s]ome of the long 'Come to Jesus!' passages should be cut," a comment that Baldwin reprinted with indignation in the introduction to *The*

¹¹⁸ Cited by Norse, 114.

¹¹⁹ Bryan R. Washington, "Wrestling with 'The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name:' John, Elisha, and the 'Master,'" *New Essays on Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 78; see also Vivian M. May, "Ambivalent Narratives, Fragmented Selves: Performative Identities and the Mutability of Roles in James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*," *New Essays on Go Tell it on the Mountain*, 97-126; cited by Eckman, 30.

Amen Corner.¹²⁰ Similarly, although early reviewers of *Go Tell it* praised Baldwin's fluid style, describing it as "essentially a religious novel" there was no mention of the novel's homoeroticism.¹²¹

The failure of early critics to interpret the homoeroticism of *Go Tell it* is echoed by the paucity of contemporary criticism that examines the novel's commentary on the black church, and more specifically, on Pentecostalism. Whilst much critical writing is divided on the question of whether Baldwin's novel is an indictment of Christianity, or whether the "power . . . comes from the integrity of Baldwin's attitude toward his material," critics have overlooked his examination of the relationship between religion and sexuality.¹²² In what follows I argue that it is precisely this tension--between the Word and the Flesh--that Baldwin explores in *Go Tell it*, a theme that he later developed--albeit outside of the church--in *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*.

¹²⁰ Baldwin, "Notes for *The Amen Corner*," *The Amen Corner*, 11.

¹²¹ Richard K. Barksdale, "Temple of the Fire Baptized," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, 145.

¹²² See Donald Gibson, "James Baldwin: The Political Anatomy of Space," *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, who concludes that there "is no irony or ambiguity present" in *Go Tell it's* religious message (6); see also Harper, who notes Baldwin's "integrity" towards the religious material (144); but see also Shirley S. Allen, "The Ironic Voice in Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*," *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, esp. 34.

Go Tell it on the Mountain begins with the story of John Grimes, who, it has always been said, would become a preacher like his father. As the son of Gabriel Grimes, head deacon of a Pentecostal storefront church in Harlem, John's future seems already decided for him, as the first line of the novel reveals: "Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father."¹²³ Even the biblical names of the characters (Gabriel, messenger of God; John, John the Baptist or John of Patmos, and Elizabeth, John's mother and mother of John the Baptist) suggest that his future has already been written. Although *Go Tell it* is principally John's story, his relationship to his (step) father, Gabriel Grimes is the central drama against which the novel unfolds. It is John's fierce resistance to becoming a preacher like his father, and their intense rivalry that sweeps bitterly through the novel.

The expectation that John will become a preacher is paralleled by the stark polarities that Baldwin presents throughout the novel. In the Pentecostal society that John inhabits, only two choices are presented to him. Either he will be saved, and become a preacher, or he will become a sinner, doomed to

¹²³ James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* [1953] (London:

eternal damnation. Throughout the novel, the warnings of Sister MaCandless echo through the pages: "You is in the Word or you ain't--ain't no half way with God," illustrated by the sharp delineation of the "sinners" and the "saved" (*GTM*, 68). Baldwin describes the two choices that John faces as the "broad way" and the "narrow way:"

Broadway: the way that led to death was broad, and many could be found thereon; but narrow was the way that led to eternal life, and few there were who found it. But he did not long for the narrow way, where all his people walked. . . . In the narrow way, the way of the cross there awaited him only humiliation for ever . . . where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil (*GTM*, 39).

By distinguishing between the broad and the narrow ways, Baldwin illustrates the Protestant divisions of the body and the soul. The broad way offers material pleasures: fine foods, entertainment and sexual pleasure. In contrast the narrow way is the way of the Lord: moderation and sexual abstinence. In *Go Tell it*, Baldwin examines the choice that must be made through his fourteen-year-old protagonist, John Grimes. The

novel becomes John's attempt to mediate a path between the narrow and the broad way, an attempt to forge an identity somewhere between the stark choices.

Crucially, John's decision cannot be made from outside of the church, a point that Baldwin makes explicit:

John thought of Hell, of his soul's redemption, and struggled to find a compromise between the way that led to life everlasting and the way that ended in the pit. But there was none, for he had been raised in the truth. . . . Yes, it was a narrow way--and John stirred in his seat, not daring to feel it God's injustice that he must make so cruel a choice (*GTM*, 46).

In this section I argue that Baldwin critiques the strictures of the narrow way by condemning Pentecostalism's repudiation and suppression of the body. In so doing, I argue that Baldwin attempts to collapse the boundaries that separate the narrow and the broad way, the body and the spirit, by not only illustrating the parallels between sexual and religious ecstasy but by suggesting an alternative that is both holy and sensual.

In an interview with Richard Goldstein in 1985, Baldwin drew attention to what he termed "[t]error of the flesh." "After all," Baldwin claimed, "we're

supposed to mortify the flesh, a doctrine which has led to untold horrors. This is a very biblical culture; people believe the wages of sin is death."¹²⁴ In *Go Tell it*, these horrors are played out as Baldwin examines the Pentecostal church's mortification and renunciation of the flesh. This repudiation of the flesh is accentuated by presenting John in a state of transition from boyhood to manhood, from a pre-sexual state to the beginnings of sexual awareness. Or, as Warren Nageueyalti has noted, we can read John's transition as a symbol of the first and last verses of John Chapter 1: "In the Beginning was the Word," through to the last verse, "And the Word was made flesh."¹²⁵

Baldwin's most vehement criticism of the Pentecostal church is in its attempts both to separate the Word from the flesh and on its insistence that the body is inherently sinful. Throughout the novel, reader and congregation are hounded by warnings that "we are born in sin," and that "there is no righteousness in man" (*GTM*, 118, 119). When Elisha and Ella Mae are publicly reprimanded for "walking disorderly," the pastor, Father James, warns the young

¹²⁴ Richard Goldstein, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats: An Interview with James Baldwin." *Village Voice* (26 June 1984): 13.

people that, though "sin was not in their minds . . . yet sin was in the flesh" (*GTM*, 18). Even the act of holding hands, of sharing "secrets and laughter" will be judged as "a sin beyond all forgiveness" (*GTM*, 18-19). Baldwin emphasises the destructiveness of this claim through John's growing belief in his abjection and self-hate. Gabriel repeatedly tells his son that he has the face of Satan, beating the wickedness out of him. In an episode that recalls Baldwin's recollection that he was the most depraved person on earth, John awakes, believing in his theological terror that he "he was left, with his sinful body, to be bound in hell a thousand years" (*GTM*, 20). Even John's surname, Grimes, suggests that he is inherently dirty, a link that the protagonist makes as he sweeps the dusty room that "no labour could ever make clean." Faced with insurmountable dust and dirt that clogs every corner, John ponders his own corrupted flesh: "He who is filthy, let him be filthy still" (*GTM*, 24).

By punctuating his narrative with religious texts, Baldwin shows how fundamentalist interpretations of religion damage not only individuals, but also an African-American sense of

¹²⁵ Warren Nagueyalti, "The Substance of Things Hoped For: Faith in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*," *Obsidian* ii 7, no. 1-2 (spring-summer 1992): 23.

self-worth. John's growing self-loathing is explored by Baldwin through the biblical story of Ham. As John scrubs his father's back in the bath he "looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father's nakedness. It was secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy like the rod. Then he hated his father, and longed for the power to cut his father down" (*GTM*, 228). John's "sin" is both particular and theological. Seeing his father's nakedness, his sex, he pierces through Gabriel's holiness, sexualising his father, eroticising the holy rod, symbol of Old Testament Power.¹²⁶ But John's sin is also theological:

Was this why he lay here, thrust out
from all human or heavenly help to-
night? . . . having looked at his
father's nakedness and mocked and cursed
him in his heart? Ah, the son of Noah
had been cursed . . ." (*GTM*, 228).

John identifies with Ham, one of the sons of Noah who, in Genesis Chapter 9, "saw his father's nakedness." As punishment for seeing his father's naked body, Ham is cursed: "Cursed be Canaan!/ The Lowest of slaves/ will he be to his brothers."

¹²⁶ See Michael Lynch, "The Everlasting Father: Mythic Quest and Rebellion in Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*," *CLA Journal* 37, no. 2 (December 1993), where he draws attention to Baldwin's use of serpent imagery, suggesting the links to original sin (162-3).

Despite the ironic voice that tells John that "[a]ll niggers had been cursed. . . . How could John be cursed for having seen in a bath-tub what another man--if that other man had ever lived--had seen ten thousand years ago, lying in an open tent?," John becomes the embodiment of the African-American people, banished to slavery (*GTM*, 228). Elsewhere in the novel this point is made explicit by Baldwin who describes African-Americans as "a bastard people, far from God, singing and crying in the wilderness" (*GTM*, 159). By playing out the curse of Ham, Baldwin draws attention to the cultural damage of a biblical myth that has perpetuated the correlation between sexual transgression and blackness. John's struggle is therefore to find a way that does not repudiate the flesh (thus perpetuating the curse of Ham), and also to find his own text, a point that Baldwin later makes explicit.

4. And the Word became Flesh

In this section, I argue that Baldwin attempts to collapse the divisions between the narrow and the broad way, between spirituality and sexuality, by emphasising the physicality of the Pentecostal congregation. As John cleans the church, his thoughts

focus not on the abstractions of God, but on "the odour of dust and sweat" that overwhelms his senses (*GTM*, 57). Worship, Baldwin illustrates, requires the body as well as the spirit to participate: when "praying or rejoicing, their bodies gave off an acrid, steamy smell, a marriage of the odours of dripping bodies and soaking, starched white linen" (*GTM*, 57, 58). Crucially, this earthy and sensual odour is almost indistinguishable from those in the secular and sinful world, where "the unconquerable odour was of dust, and sweat, and urine and home-made gin" (*GTM*, 39).

Baldwin further collapses the divisions of the sinners and the saved by emphasising the power of the body beneath the holy robes. When the pastor's nephew, Elisha, is "saved," his most spiritual moment is marked, not by his spiritual re-birth, but by the physicality of his trembling body, as "his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit" (*GTM*, 17). When Elisha is later publicly reprimanded for "walking disorderly" with Ella Mae, the clothes that cover her flesh become flimsy boundaries that only accentuate the naked body: her "white robes now seemed to be the merest, thinnest covering for the nakedness of breasts and insistent thighs . . ." (*GTM*, 19).

By exploring the forbidden relationship of Ella Mae and Elisha, Baldwin suggests that sexual desire cannot be suppressed, but also that it can be re-directed vicariously through the exertions of worship. John watches Ella Mae dance as the church is filled with the presence of the Lord; then Elisha dances, a synchronised courtship, a choreography of licensed sensuality: "At one moment, head thrown back, eyes closed, sweat standing on his brow, he sat at the piano, singing and playing; then . . . he stiffened and trembled, and cried out. *Jesus, oh Lord Jesus!*" (*GTM*, 16). The religious ecstasy that Elisha experiences is infused with sexual energy as he trembles, stiffens, and cries out.¹²⁷ Compare the description of Elisha, with the lovemaking of Ida and Vivaldo in *Another Country*: "he was aching in a way he had never ached before, was congested in a new way. . . . Come on come on come on come on. Come on!" (*AC*, 178-9).

Elisha's throes continue to gather momentum in what could be a description of multiple orgasms: "his face congested, contorted with this rage, and the

¹²⁷ For a more recent comparison of sexual and religious ecstasy in the black church, see Ann Allen Shockley's *Say Jesus and Come to Me* [1982] (Florida: The Naiad Press, 1987). In one scene a worshipper cries out "Hallelujah! *Jesus-s-s!*," and her face is explicitly described as "ecstatically convulsed in orgasmic agitation" as she cries, "I'm *com-m-ing!*" (7).

muscles leaping and swelling in his long, dark neck. It seemed that he could not breathe, that his body could not contain this passion" (*GTM*, 17). As Elisha continues to moan, his passion becomes infective, so that "the rhythm of all the others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm" (*GTM*, 17). The bodies of the congregation become the body of Elisha. Like the "shoutings and groanings" of the "Bacchic" evangelical gathering that Nella Larsen's *Helga Crane* encounters, Baldwin's congregation moans with ambiguous pleasure.¹²⁸ When Elisha stops dancing, he collapses, "moaning, on his face," and the climax and relief are felt throughout, as "a great moaning filled the church." As if defying the reader not to link the sexual with holy, the next line reads: "[t]here was sin among them" (*GTM*, 17).

Baldwin's suggestion that religious and sexual ecstasy may in fact be inseparable is not of course a new argument. The anthropologist Robert Briffault concluded in the 1970s that "religious exaltation such as inspired by the founders of Christian moral tradition is a close transformation of sexual

¹²⁸ Nella Larsen, "*Quicksand*," *Quicksand and Passing* [1928] (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), 113. Larsen develops the sensuality of the meeting: the music is described as "frankly irreverent," and the protagonist, Helga, then seduces the pastor (112).

appetites."¹²⁹ In fact, as Ann-Janine Morey has demonstrated in *Religion and Sexuality in American Literature* (1992), the anxiety about the polemical proximity between religious and sexual ecstasy can be traced as far back as Augustine. In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards had vehemently warned of the Devil's incitement to lust. Warning Christians to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic religious sentiments, Edwards strongly opposed "Christian love and holy kisses," lest the acts debased "Christian love into unclean and brutish lust."¹³⁰

More recently, the relationship between religious and sexual ecstasy came under scrutiny from the scientific world. In what became known as the Scopes trial, scientists attempted to prove the links between sexual and religious release. The psychoanalyst, Theodore Shroeder (1864-1953), for example, argued that religious fervour is always characterised by sexual drive, even if it does not enter into consciousness. Shroeder's controversial work, with memorable titles such as "Converting Sex into Religiosity," (1933) and "Divinity in the Semen"

¹²⁹ Cited by Ann-Janine Morey, *Religion and Sexuality in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26.

¹³⁰ Cited by Morey, 24.

(1932), stressed that the "differential essence of religion is always reducible to a sex ecstasy," [sic] directly conjoining religious ecstasy with sexual energy.¹³¹

Whilst it is unlikely that Baldwin would have been familiar with Shroeder's work, his account of an African-American Pentecostal revival illuminates the descriptions of ecstatic worship in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. In "Revivals, Sex and Holy Ghost," (1919) Shroeder vividly recollects a gathering of some five hundred worshippers in New England. Throughout the flamboyant description, Shroeder punctuates his article with descriptions of bodily exertion, strongly echoing Baldwin's emphasis on the physicality of worship. The pastor, we learn, paralleling *Go Tell it's* description of Elisha, is "beside himself with some sort of all obsessing emotion or passion."¹³² As Shroeder watches he can only compare it to "the uttermost of sexual orgasm." As the sermon reaches a climax, amidst the "groans" and "shrieks" from the increasingly excited congregation, Shroeder observes the gyrations and "pelvic movement[s]" of a woman "that probably many must have gotten from her a sexual

¹³¹ Morey, 21.

¹³² Theodore Shroeder, "Revivals, Sex and Holy Ghost," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 14 (April-July 1919): 38.

suggestion implicating an invisible partner."¹³³ As the exhausted women seek "first aid" from the attentive young men, Shroeder emphasises the "thin underclothing" of one woman in particular, whose breasts, Shroeder describes with some apparent excitement of his own, "flopped violently and conspicuously." In an echo of Ella Mae's "insistent" flesh, Shroeder describes her coat, which "could not be made to stay buttoned."¹³⁴

A spurious language marks Shroeder's account: it is not clear whether his references to "the primitive chant" of the service is an acknowledgement of Pentecostal's African heritage, or his own Primitivist fascination with cultural difference.¹³⁵ Nor is it clear whether Shroeder, who acknowledges that he is a "heathen void of religion," believes that possession can be explained outside of psychoanalysis.¹³⁶ But what is clear is Shroeder's conclusion that the display of ecstatic convulsion is proportionate to the "varying degrees of shame or by an attendant feeling of inferiority."¹³⁷ In other words, the more frenzied the possession, the more sexually repressed the person is.

¹³³ Shroeder: 36, 43.

¹³⁴ Shroeder: 44.

¹³⁵ Shroeder: 38.

¹³⁶ Shroeder: 35.

¹³⁷ Shroeder: 46.

By claiming that people who have "normal" religious experiences "are at the very times of their experience conscious of the sexual involvement and character of their religious ecstasies [sic]," Shroeder not only de-pathologises the accounts he describes, but collapses the division between spirit and flesh. Like Baldwin, Shroeder insists on the irrepressibility of both the body and of sexual drive during religious worship. But Baldwin, in contrast to Shroeder, suggests that an authentic religious conversion must be accompanied, not just by sexual energy, but through the love and strength of another person. As I show in the conclusion to this section, in *Go Tell it*, John navigates a path between the choices of the narrow and the broad way, between the flesh and the spirit, insisting on the possibility of redemption that is both holy and sensual.

In both "The Outing" and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Baldwin presents his protagonists with an alternative to the Puritan strictures of the Pentecostal church. Baldwin's short story in particular clarifies many of *Go Tell it's* important but understated explorations of sexual and religious love. At first glance, "The Outing" reads as a shorter version of *Go Tell it*. We quickly learn about the protagonist, Johnnie and his embittered relationship

to his deacon father, Gabriel. Like *Go Tell it*, the narrative is framed by the church, but in "The Outing" the plot unfolds on a church outing, as the congregation sail down the Hudson river.

The central difference between the two stories is in the close friendship that John (*Go Tell it*) and Johnnie ("The Outing") foster. In *Go Tell it*, John is strengthened by his admiration for Elisha's piety and manliness, "wondering if he would ever be as holy as Elisha" (*GTM*, 14). In "The Outing," the central friendship is between David and Johnnie, names that suggest the biblical love between David and Jonathan. In both versions, Baldwin suggests that a truly authentic religious experience must be accompanied by love.

In *Go Tell it*, John discovers the possibility of redemption through love after a brief encounter with Elisha in the church. As John is cleaning the church, he playfully wrestles with Elisha until the tussle becomes more and more intense. John watches "the veins rise on Elisha's forehead and in his neck," feeling his "breath" on him. Echoing Baldwin's descriptions of the congregation's physicality, "the odour of Elisha's sweat was heavy in John's nostrils . . . and John . . . was filled with a wild delight" (*GTM*, 61). As the sweaty pair disentangle themselves after the climax of

their struggle, Elisha asks "I didn't hurt you none, did I," which reads as a tender post-coital address, paralleling the tender whispers between David and Johnnie in "The Outing:" "'Who do you love?' he [David] whispered. 'Who's your boy?' 'You,' he muttered, 'I love you.'"¹³⁸

The relationship between David and Johnnie in particular is contrasted with the devotion of the adult congregation. When the saints gather on board the ship, they watch Father James, "expectantly, with love:"

They laughed and shouted after him, their joy so great that they laughed as children and some of them cried as children do; in the fullness and assurance of salvation, in the knowledge that the Lord was in their midst and that each heart, swollen to anguish, yearned only to be filled with His glory. Then, in that moment, each of them might have mounted with wings like eagles far past the sordid persistence of the flesh, the depthless iniquity of the heart, the doom of hours and days and weeks ("TO," 41).

¹³⁸ James Baldwin, "The Outing," *Going to Meet the Man* (London: Penguin, 1991), 39; hereafter abbreviated as "TO."

Religious faith becomes not only a tonic for the squalor and boredom of senseless poverty, but a chance to recapture childish innocence and release the burden of the sinful body. But this moment of bliss, Baldwin infers, is not enough. When David and Johnnie enter the blissful throes of the saints, whilst Elisha is in agony on the threshing floor, Baldwin describes it:

as though their youth, barely begun,
 were already put away; and the animal,
 so vividly restless and undiscovered, so
 tense with power, ready to spring had
 been already stalked and trapped and
 offered, a perpetual blood sacrifice for
 the Lord. Yet their bodies continued to
 change and grow, preparing them,
 mysteriously, and with ferocious speed,
 for manhood. No matter how careful their
 movements, these movements suggested,
 with a distinctness dreadful for the
 redeemed to see, the pagan lusting
 beneath the blood-washed robes ("TO,"
 44).

The passage is infused with Baldwin's rage against the church that suffocates, rather than nurturing youthful love. To be saved, Baldwin suggests, is to have your primal energies sapped, destroyed: an act of immolation, not revelation. To become like the young Sylvia, who refuses to show any interest in David

unless he is saved, or Elisha, spellbound by the Lord, who warns the boys that they must be saved, since there "[a]in't nothing in the world for you" ("TO," 52, 33).

The point that Baldwin makes is that there *is* something in the world for both David and Johnnie, but only if unfettered by the Church's demonisation of the flesh. In contrast to the Saints who long to soar "far past the sordid persistence of the flesh," Baldwin emphasises the irrepressible body beneath the veneer of the holy robes ("TO," 41). By describing the boys' lust as "pagan," and by drawing attention both to the "bestial sobs" and "the music [which] grew more savage," Baldwin implicitly links the boys to a pre-Christian era, tacitly suggesting that the African roots of Pentecostalism have burst through ("TO," 45).

Baldwin's muted reference to Pentecostalism's pre-Christian origins is strongly reminiscent of the work of Zora Neale Hurston, one of the earliest writers to use the term "Sanctified Church."¹³⁹ Hurston's repeated insistence that the "Negro is not a Christian really," echoes Baldwin's claim that the "essential religion of Black people comes out of something which is not Europe. When Black people talk

¹³⁹ Sanders, 3.

about true religion, they're 'speaking in tongues' practically. It would not be understood in Rome."¹⁴⁰ In her novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), Hurston depicts a service amongst African-American workers that transforms into a pre-Christian celebration. As the workers discard the instruments of the white folks (guitar and fiddle), they clap, invoking the "voice of Kata-Kumba, the great drum," so that "the shore of Africa receded."¹⁴¹ Similarly, Hurston's preacher protagonist John Pearson, fails to recognise the division between spirit and flesh; when he preaches, Hurston draws explicitly on his African heritage, as he "rolled his African drum up to the altar, and called his Congo gods by Christian names," reciting his "pagan poesy."¹⁴²

Hurston's explicit references to Pentecostalism's African heritage illuminate Baldwin's attempts to collapse the divisions between body and flesh. In *Go*

¹⁴⁰ Hurston, "The Sanctified Church," *The Sanctified Church*, 103; see also "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (56); Kalamu ya Salaam, "James Baldwin: Looking Towards the Eighties," *Black Collegian* 10, no. 2 (October-November 1979): 108; see also James Baldwin, "Introduction," *Price*, where he compares black and white churches: "We do not . . . share the same hope or speak the same language" (xix).

¹⁴¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934; reprint with an afterword by Holly Eley, London: Virago, 1993), 59, 62.

¹⁴² Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, 145-6, 221; Rampersad notes that Hughes wished that Hurston had written *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, contrasting her feeling for folk idiom with Baldwin's over-poeticization (205). In Shockley's *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, the protagonist, Myrtle, is a lesbian minister who conflates sexual and religious ecstasy. In one explicit scene she is

Tell it, John's conversion is described explicitly as a "possession," an experience, as Joseph A. Brown has noted, that "is traceable through all African-based cultures in the Americas."¹⁴³ But at the very moment when John is in agony on the threshing floor, as "the Holy Ghost was speaking," John feels "a tightening in his loin-strings" and crucially, "a sudden yearning tenderness for Elisha," a feeling Baldwin describes as "desire, sharp and awful . . ." (*GTM*, 224, 225).

John's yearning for Elisha in the depths of his agony anticipates Baldwin's insistence that "a human being could only be saved by another human being."¹⁴⁴ In "The Outing," Baldwin makes this even more explicit as Johnnie feels the awful terror of the Lord. As Johnnie feels overwhelmed by the timeless cacophony of wailing and fire, at the very moment when he seems to give in to the Lord, "Johnnie felt suddenly, not the presence of the Lord, but the presence of David; which seemed to reach out to him, hand reaching out to hand in the fury of flood-time, to drag him to the bottom of the water or to carry him safe to shore" ("TO," 47). Rather than turning to God, Johnnie is "saved" by the love of David; he feels, "such a depth of love,

referred to as an "ancient Hausa queen," suggesting an African legacy that does not separate the sexual from the religious (7).

¹⁴³ Brown: 55.

such nameless and terrible joy and pain, that he might have fallen, in the face of that company, weeping at David's feet" ("TO," 48).

Baldwin's descriptions of the boys' conversions are free from irony, emphasising the overwhelming power of religious conversion. As Joseph Brown has noted, Baldwin "does not destroy the religious universe. Rather, he writes of a reality disconnected from true liberation, true freedom, true wholeness (holiness)."¹⁴⁵ Thus, as Brown continues, though Baldwin describes the conversions as both erotic and holy, he "has 'secularized' the images only in the minds of those who think there can be a dichotomy between the heavenly and the mundane," and also, we might add, between the body and the spirit.¹⁴⁶

5. Love is in the Air

In a revealing scene in *Go Tell it*, John Grimes dreams of a life that is unfettered by the strictures of the church:

In this world John, who was, his father
said, ugly, who was always the smallest

¹⁴⁴ Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," *Price*, 389.

¹⁴⁵ Brown: 61.

¹⁴⁶ Brown: 65.

boy in the class, and who had no friends, became immediately beautiful, tall, and popular. . . . He was a poet, or a college president, or a movie star; he drank expensive whisky, and he smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green package (*GTM*, 21).

In both *Go Tell it* and the short story, "The Outing," this dream of secular success remains but a fantasy. John's choices in *Go Tell it*, like those of Johnnie and David in "The Outing," are governed by the church. In short, there is no society, no reality outside of religion's watchful eye. It is only in Baldwin's short story, "Death of the Prophet," a microcosm of *Go Tell it*, that the protagonist, Johnnie, upon reaching adolescence, flees the stifling world of the church.

"Death of the Prophet," is a minor but important story since it anticipates and connects Baldwin's later protagonists who move outside of the world of formal religion. As Johnnie watches his dying father, Baldwin describes him in the throes of both release and terror. Free from his father's tyrannical Old Testament wrath, Johnnie is at last "the man, the conqueror, alone on the tilting earth."¹⁴⁷ But with this freedom, as later suggested by John Grimes's

¹⁴⁷ Baldwin, "The Death of the Prophet:" 260.

dream in *Go Tell it*, comes fear and guilt. Although Johnnie has made his home "in the populous Sodom," savouring the forbidden delights of films, plays, smoking and drinking, the path to the broad way is not straightforward. "The joys of hell," Johnnie discovers, "are as difficult to discover as the joys of heaven and are even more over-rated." At the end of the story, as Johnnie leaves his deceased father, he watches the cloud envelop the sky, "burning, like God hanging over the world."¹⁴⁸

In "Prophet" Johnnie's escape into the secular world is described by Baldwin as both necessary and terrifying, and, like Johnnie, Baldwin's novels move away from the arena of the formal church. In *Giovanni's Room*, *Another Country*, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin's protagonists struggle in the urban metropolises of the secular world. By moving his fiction from the church to the city, Baldwin's writing becomes, not as many critics have noted, more secular, but increasingly suspicious of the church's social effectiveness and its spiritual authenticity. In *Giovanni's Room*, the eponymous hero curses God on the death of his new-born child. In *Another Country*, the

¹⁴⁸ Baldwin, "The Death of the Prophet:" 258, 261.

one mention of "MOUNT OLIVE APOSTOLIC FAITH CHURCH" is subsumed into the merciless landscape of the city, offering no solace to the agonised Rufus (AC, 143).

Increasingly Baldwin depicts the black church as an anachronistic and ineffective weapon against the ravages of modern life. In *Tell Me How Long*, Black Christopher rails against Christianity's justification of slavery, whilst Leo recalls that the church threw him out (TMHL, 390, 142). Those that remain in the church are either destroyed or so hypocritical that they are beyond redemption. Jerry in *Tell Me How Long* recalls that his mother is so "fucked up" because she believes what the church tells her (TMHL, 229). Likewise, Caleb in *Tell Me How Long* finds the Lord but loses his capacity for love. But Baldwin reserves his harshest condemnation for those who adhere blindly to the church's tenets, a charge levelled by Hall Montana in *Just Above My Head*: "[t]he most dreadful people I have ever known are those who have been 'saved'" (JAMH, 349). Thus Fonny's mother in *If Beale Street* is depicted as a cold and loveless woman who refuses either to support her son or to accept her grandchild since s/he was conceived outside of the church.

Despite Baldwin's virulent critique of those who remain in the church, his fiction continues to argue for the necessity of an authentic spiritual

commitment. Characters like Florence in *Beale St.* who eschews the façade of the modern church in search of a more meaningful spiritual experience. Echoing his insistence that he had to leave the church in order to become a real human being, Baldwin's protagonists seek spiritual sustenance away from the hypocrisy of the church. Thus when Leo in *Tell Me How Long* is told by Caleb that it is a sin not to praise the Lord, his reply is "can't we . . . each praise God in our own way?" (*TMHL*, 328).

In the final section of this chapter I argue that, whilst his fictional work both moved outside of the church and rejected its formal doctrine, Baldwin not only continued to emphasise the importance of spirituality in his fiction, but attempted to re-define the notion of religiousness. In particular I argue that Baldwin increasingly suggested that redemption could, and indeed must be achieved through mutual love and companionship. By emphasising the sanctity of sexual love (as opposed to sex), Baldwin developed what he had hinted at through the stunted attempts of John and Elisha in *Go Tell it* and Johnnie and David in "The Outing." As Trudier Harris has insightfully argued, whilst it "would have been the height of blasphemy for John Grimes [*Go Tell it*] to see God reflected in another human being," by moving

outside of the church, particularly in *If Beale Street* and *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin moved from traditional religion to a new humanist religion of love, where redemption is found in one another.¹⁴⁹ However, in contrast to critics such as John Lash, I argue that Baldwin's vision, although it places emphasis on homosexual and bisexual relationships, is not exclusively a peon to the redemptive powers of same-sex desire.

Baldwin's last two novels, *If Beale Street* and *Just Above My Head* are both love stories. *If Beale Street*, recounted by Tish, tells the story of her lover, Fonny, who has falsely been accused of rape. Tish's story recounts her struggle to support her lover whilst pregnant, faced by the impenetrable (mis) justice system. Baldwin's last novel, the tale of a great gospel singer, Arthur Montana, is a love story on two levels. Narrated by Montana's brother and manager, Hall, the story is both "a love song" to his brother, but also the story of the love between Arthur and his lover, Jimmy. In the following section I explore how Baldwin creates what Trudier Harris astutely refers to, as not a rejection of spirituality, but an attempt "to recapture the essence

¹⁴⁹ Trudier Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street* Could

of Christianity." Moving away from what he sees as the distortions and hypocrisies of Christianity, Baldwin attempts to unearth "the essence of love."¹⁵⁰

Before examining Baldwin's explorations of love, it is important to clarify and contextualise his writing. First, it is important not to confuse Baldwin's emphasis on love with sentimentality, a feeling that he explicitly warns against.¹⁵¹ Second, his definition of love is explicitly active and political. Echoing Cornel West's warning that a "love ethic has nothing to do with sentimental feelings or tribal connections," and Martin Luther King's insistence that "love is not to be confused with some sentimental outpouring," Baldwin explicitly points out that, by focussing on love, he does not "mean anything passive."¹⁵² Instead, he means "something active, something more like a fire . . . something which can change you . . . I mean a passionate belief, a passionate knowledge of what a human being can do . . ."¹⁵³ Like Martin Luther King who spoke of love as "a

Talk," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, 215.

¹⁵⁰ Trudier Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, 215.

¹⁵¹ John Hall "James Baldwin: A Transition Interview," *Transition* 0, no. 41 (1972): 24; see also *The Fire Next Time*, where he distinguishes love from "the infantile American sense of being made happy" (82).

¹⁵² Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 19; Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love in Action," *Strength to Love* [1963] (London: Fontana Books, 1969), 50.

¹⁵³ Mossman, 45.

force," Baldwin wrote both that he conceived of God "as a means of liberation," and also that "[l]ove is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up."¹⁵⁴

Baldwin's most radical rewriting of Christian--or at least spiritual identity--is to place emphasis on salvation and redemption, not through God, but through a love that is founded on the sharing of pain. In contrast to characters such as John Grimes who agonise on the threshing floor at the mercy of an Old Testament God who might save or damn him, Baldwin offers salvation through support and love of another, a theme clearly articulated by Leo Proudhammer in *Tell Me How Long*:

some moments teach one the price of the human condition: if one can live with one's pain, then one respects the pain of others, and so, briefly, but transcendentally, we can release each other from pain (*TMHL*, 267-8).

By using the language of religious conversion ("transcendentally") Baldwin explicitly replaces salvation through prayer with what Leo refers to repeatedly as "the touch of another . . . no matter how transient, at no matter what price" (*TMHL*, 270).

¹⁵⁴ Cited by bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 7; Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority,"

Baldwin's emphasis on "touch" is both physical and spiritual, suggesting being moved (to be touched), but also the physical act of reaching out to another. By emphasising the physicality of touch, Baldwin implicitly attempts to redress his repeated critique of an American Puritanism that prohibits and inhibits both bodily and spiritual contact, what he explicitly refers to as the damage caused by "a fear of anybody touching anybody."¹⁵⁵ In order to redress this, Baldwin insists that we must overcome our "terror of the flesh," "the terror of human life, of human touch . . ."¹⁵⁶ As he repeatedly stated, "Nobody makes any connections," resulting in "this truncated, de-balled, galvanized activity which thinks of itself as sex."¹⁵⁷

Love, particularly in Baldwin's later fiction, becomes the backbone of a more authentic spiritual existence. In *Beale Street* in particular, this is emphasised through Baldwin's depiction of the love between Fonny and Tish. In contrast to the hypocrisy and the inconstancy of the church, Fonny and Tish's love is described explicitly as a "revelation" (*IBSCT*, 73). As Trudier Harris rightly points out, their experience of love initiates a transformation, drawing

Nobody Knows, 114, 115.

¹⁵⁵ Eckman, 32.

¹⁵⁶ Baldwin, "No Name on the Street," *Price*, 477.

on the songs of religious conversion: "I looked at my hands, my hands looked new. I looked at my feet, they did too."¹⁵⁸ Although their relationship takes place outside of the church and out of wedlock, Baldwin emphasises their authentic spiritual commitment to one another: "[w]hen two people love each other, when they really love each other, everything that happens between them has something of a sacramental air" (*IBSCT*, 169). The sanctity of love is reiterated in *Just Above My Head* when the narrator, Hall, wonders at the love between Jimmy and Arthur: "it had something to do with their vows, with their relation to each other: but it was more, much more than that. It was a wonder, a marvel--a mystery. I call it holy" (*JAMH*, 576).¹⁵⁹

In both *Just Above My Head* and *Beale Street* in particular, Baldwin suggests that love can only be attained through a holistic acceptance of the body as well as the spirit. Whilst acknowledging that the body is formed "in the womb, with your mother's shit and piss," referring elsewhere to the "inconvenient" but "sacred flesh," Baldwin insists on the sanctity and

¹⁵⁷ Eckman, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, 213.

¹⁵⁹ When Arthur dies, Baldwin describes Jimmy's re-visiting of their old haunts as a pilgrimage, a trip to "the Stations of the Cross" (50).

acceptance of the body (*JAMH*, 18; *TMHL*, 64). In *Giovanni's Room*, David's inability to love is hindered by an insistence on purity: he will not allow Giovanni to touch him, believing in the purity of his body. It is only at the end of the novel, when David has experienced both love and loss that he understands that his salvation is hidden in his flesh, a theme that anticipates Baldwin's later work.¹⁶⁰ In contrast to David in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's later protagonists make no such distinction between body and soul. Thus Jimmy recalls that "[e]very inch of Arthur was sacred to me. And I mean: sacred" (*JAMH*, 163). In *Beale Street*, the sticky mess of blood and sperm becomes not a sign of shame but evidence of a wondrous act: "some strange anointing. Or . . . a tribal rite" (*IBSCT*, 100). Again, in contrast to John Grimes in *Go Tell it*, who feels shame at his onanism and sexual dreams, Baldwin pictures Fonny masturbating alone in prison but full of love, concentrating "as though in prayer" (*IBSCT*, 210).

In contrast to the church's emphasis on nakedness as both foul and terrifying in *Go Tell it*, Baldwin's later fiction demands its sanctity. In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin explains this through Arthur's first

¹⁶⁰ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* [1956] (London: Penguin, 1990),

experience with a man. In contrast to the biblical emphasis on shame, Arthur concludes that "this is what lovers do for each other--by daring to be naked, by giving each other the strength to have nothing to hide" (*JAMH*, 496). Elsewhere in the novel, this theme is reiterated by Hall, who wonders "if I would find in myself the strength to give love, and to take it: to accept my nakedness as sacred, and to hold sacred the nakedness of another" (*JAMH*, 326).

Baldwin's repeated references to nakedness rework the Old Testament notion of standing naked before God in order to be saved. In *Go Tell it*, for example, John imagines with dread the moment when he will "come back to die and stand naked before the judgement bar," just as Gabriel depicts the sinner who "saw himself in all his foulness naked before the Lord" (*GTM*, 39, 120). In Baldwin's later fiction, nakedness is holy, but the fear of judgement is replaced by the act of complete surrender to another lover. Thus authentic sexual love becomes itself an act both of revelation and of redemption. In *Just Above My Head*, this is most keenly illustrated by the description of Crunch making love to Julia, a former child preacher. Crunch, we learned, wanted to "drench and heal her soul. He, as it were,

prayed with her, longing to give her all that she needed . . ." (*JAMH*, 252). Betrayed by the church, Baldwin suggests that Julia's true conversion begins with her relationship with Crunch, a sexual act which explicitly heals and transforms her. After making love, Julia feels, not remorse, but remarks that she is "saved," a theme that punctuates the relationship between Fonny and Tish. The first time the couple make love, Tish recalls that Fonny "rode deeper and deeper not so much into me as into a kingdom which lay just behind his eyes," adding, "something broke in me" (*IBSCT*, 55, 97).

Tish's recollection that "[i]f his arms had not held me, I would have fallen straight downward, backward, to my death," is strongly reminiscent of John Grimes's agonised conversion on the threshing floor (*IBSCT*, 95). But in contrast to John, who feels "like a rock, a dead man's body," "screaming, at the very bottom of darkness," Tish and Fonny see revelation in one another (*GTM*, 223, 224). Making love to Fonny, Tish notes, "brought me to another place," adding that "I had crossed my river," in a language evocative both of crossing the threshing floor and of crossing the river Jordan (*IBSCT*, 97, 170). In *Just Above My Head* Baldwin again uses religious language to distinguish an authentically spiritual sexual

experience. As Arthur and Crunch make love, Baldwin explicitly frames their experience within a religious language: "[t]hey were beginning to know each other; the biblical phrase unlocked itself and held them in a joy as sharp as terror" (*JAMH*, 222-3).

Baldwin's emphasis on the sanctity of spiritual/sexual love is clearly distinguished from sexual gratification. "[S]ex is only sex," Baldwin wrote in "The Male Prison," and it does not take long before we discover "that there are few things on earth more futile or more deadening than a meaningless round of conquests;" or, as he wrote more succinctly in "Here Be Dragons," "love and sexual activity are not synonymous."¹⁶¹ In *Just Above My Head*, this distinction is made clear by Hall who, recalling a succession of lovers, realises that "if there's no future for you, if fucking doesn't become something more than fucking, then you have to forget it. And then you're worse off than before" (*JAMH*, 87). Later in the novel, Hall returns to this theme, emphasising the need for spiritual, not just physical gratification:

without love, pleasure withers quickly,
becomes a foul taste on the palate, and

¹⁶¹ Baldwin, "The Male Prison," *Nobody Knows*, 134; "Here Be Dragons," *Price*, 687; see also, "[t]here is nothing more boring . . . than sexual activity as an end to itself" (688).

pleasure's inventions are soon exhausted. There must be a soul within the body you are holding, a soul which you are striving to meet, a soul which is striving to meet yours (*JAMH*, 326).

The distinction between sexual gratification and spiritual sexual love is a theme that characterises Baldwin's fiction. When Hall falls out of love with Martha, this moment is suggested by the loss of spiritual connection in their lovemaking: "We fucked hard, hot, and hungry, but we had not made love, something was gone" (*JAMH*, 148). In contrast, Hall's lovemaking with his wife, Ruth, is described with a religious intensity: "after a mighty pause, I shot it all into her, shot the grief and the terror and the journey into her," and again, "I kiss her legs, her thighs . . . I at least, thank God that I come out the wilderness. My soul shouts hallelujah, and I do not thank God" (*JAMH*, 12, 17).

Conclusion

my ancestors counseled me to *keep the faith*: and I promised, I vowed that I would. . . . The music is everywhere, resounds, no sound: and tells me that now is the moment, for me, to return to the eye of the hurricane

James Baldwin, "Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone," *The Price of the Ticket*

I do believe that salvation, if there is salvation, is mercurial, indefinite, long drawn out, unlikely of definition, and impossible to chain or to predict

James Baldwin, Letter to Dan (28 December 1946)

To conclude this chapter I examine the ways in which Baldwin uses music--and in particular gospel music--to form a bridge between traditional notions of religiousness and his new definition of spirituality. "[M]usic," Baldwin stated in his last interview, "was

and is my salvation."¹⁶² Whilst gospel music has its roots in the Sanctified Church, its historical dissemination into secular life--whilst retaining a spiritual foundation--offers an appropriate model for Baldwin's redefinition of spirituality.¹⁶³ In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin illustrates this point by showing how Arthur brought the spirit of the church--through gospel music--wherever he went:

And yes, the church, wherever it was, whatever it was, a football field in Montgomery, Alabama, a stadium in Tokyo, a music hall in Paris, Albert Hall in London, or as far away as Sydney: rocked (JAMH, 25-5).

Significantly, Baldwin explicitly points out that Arthur had neither been saved nor baptised (JAMH, 90). And yet, recollecting Ida's singing in *Another Country*, for those who hear Arthur sing, "there was something frightening about so deep and unreadable a passion in one so young. Arthur's phrasing was the key--unanswerable; his delivery of the song made you realize that he knew what the song was about" (JAMH, 90).

¹⁶² Quincy Troupe, "The Last Interview," *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, ed. Quincy Troupe (New York, London, etc.: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 207.

¹⁶³ For a useful overview of the blend between sacred and secular in gospel music, see Sanders, 71-90.

By emphasising that Arthur has no formal connection to the church, Baldwin repeats his insistence that authentic spirituality and redemption can be--and indeed must be--found outside of the church. Gospel music becomes, for Baldwin, the ideal medium to express this belief. For those that sing gospel music, Baldwin contends, "aren't singing gospel--if you see what I mean:"

When a nigger quotes the Gospel, he is not quoting: he is telling you what happened to him today, and what is certainly going to happen to you tomorrow. . . . Our suffering is our bridge to one another. Everyone must cross this bridge, or die while he still lives--but this is not a political, still less, a popular apprehension (JAMH, 113).

Gospel music, therefore, becomes in *Just Above*, a medium to effect his insistence on connections between people. A way to share and explore love and suffering that was unavailable to Rufus in *Another Country*. It is a theme that Baldwin had explored in "Sonny's Blues," where the narrator declares that "the tale of

how we suffer and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard."¹⁶⁴

In *Just Above*, gospel music becomes a symphony of love. Just as the same gospel songs become re-created, renewed through each voice that sings them, so Baldwin re-composes and redefines the songs in his novel. In *Just Above*, gospel music becomes an expression, not just of God, but a way of reaching out, connecting to lovers:

Maybe all gospel songs begin out of blasphemy and presumption--what the church would call blasphemy and presumption: out of entering God's suffering, and making it your own, out of entering your suffering and challenging God Almighty to have or live or to withhold mercy. There will be two of us at the mercy seat: *my Lord, and I!* (JAMH, 8).

Just as Baldwin redefines redemption through the love of another--and not just God--so gospel music embraces and works through a suffering that is particular, not just theological. "Our history," the narrator of *Just Above* concludes, "is each other. . . . Perhaps that is what the gospel singer is singing" (JAMH, 512).

¹⁶⁴ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," *Going to Meet the Man*, 141; see also Tish's revelation in *Beale Street*. As she listens to Ray

By using the spiritual heritage of gospel music, Baldwin redefines the boundaries of the secular and the sacrilegious. In both *Beale Street* and *Just Above*, Baldwin invokes gospel music to signal and define a sexual love that retains a spiritual purity. In *Beale Street*, Tish explicitly refers to the gospel song, "Steal Away." By noting how "I was in his hands, he called me by the thunder at my ear. I was in his hands: I was being changed," Tish tropes on the gospel song: "My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by thunder/ The trumpet sound within my soul (*IBSCT*, 95).¹⁶⁵ In *Beale Street*, Baldwin uses the references to gospel songs to bridge the gap between the sacred and the secular, the body and the spirit. Thus, as they make love, Tish recalls how "[a] singing began in me and his body became sacred--his buttocks, as they quivered and rose and fell . . . brought me to another place" (*IBSCT*, 97).

In *Just Above*, Baldwin again uses gospel song as an expression of sexual love. In his last novel, however, gospel music becomes a way of sanctifying love between men: a medium that facilitates otherwise prohibited relationships. When Arthur and Crunch play

Charles, she notes how "everything seemed connected" (54).

¹⁶⁵ Cited by Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in *If Beale Street Could Talk*," *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*, 214.

music together, the songs become a vicarious experience of spiritual sexual fulfilment:

He [Arthur] paused again . . . trusting every second of this unprecedented darkness, knowing Crunch and he were moving together, here, now, in the song, to some new place; they had never sung together like this before, his voice in Crunch's sound, Crunch's sound filling his voice (*JAMH*, 206).

The language is strongly evocative both of religious conversion ("some new place"), but also of sexual intimacy: a medium that allows the boys to enter and fill one another. As Arthur and Crunch sing gospel music, it becomes a way of expressing the spirituality of their desire for one another, exemplified by Baldwin's nuancing of traditional songs: "*somebody touched me . . . it must have been the hand of the Lord!*" (*JAMH*, 207).

By framing same-sex relationships through gospel music, Baldwin attempts both to redefine the boundaries of sacrilegiousness and also to insist on the purity of all love. As Hall, the narrator of *Just Above* records, music became, for Arthur and Jimmy, a way of placing and defining their love. Music "became for them, then, theirs, a sacrament, a stone marking a moment on their road: the point of no return, when

they confessed to each other, astounded, terrified, but having no choice, in the hearing of men, and in the sight of God" (*JAMH*, 575). As Hall marvels at the depth of love between Jimmy and Arthur, he is struck at how "sacrilegious" his brother's love is; and yet, he is also struck by Arthur's response, "which seemed to ring out over those apocalyptic streets" (*JAMH*, 575).

Love, then, aided and nurtured through gospel music becomes the bedrock of Baldwin's new religion. Irrespective of class, gender or sexuality, love becomes, for Baldwin, a redemptive act. In *Just Above*, this is explicitly illustrated through Arthur's relationship with Crunch:

And yet, he knows that, when he was happy with Crunch, he was neither guilty nor ashamed. He had felt a purity, a shining, joy, as though he had been, astoundingly, miraculously blessed, and had feared neither Satan, man, nor God. He had not doubted for a moment that all love was holy (*JAMH*, 470-1).

Love, spiritual love, is the new religion. For it is "love," Baldwin concludes, "which is salvation" (*JAMH*, 177).

Conclusion

In the most recent critical book on Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (2001), Lawrie Balfour rightly calls into question the usefulness of dividing Baldwin's oeuvre between his "political" and "non-political" writing, and between his earlier and later work.¹ As scholarship on Baldwin--and more generally in African-American criticism--increasingly engages with cultural studies in order to more fully understand the complexity of his work, the divisive nature of criticism may be dying out. Important recent work on masculinity and sexuality in Baldwin's work in particular has highlighted a more general move towards examining the complicated nexus of race and sexuality in African-American literature and culture.

This important move towards engaging both with race and sexuality finds contrast, however, with the continuing lack of scholarship on Baldwin's later work. Too often, as I noted in this thesis, the usual suspects (notably *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and "Sonny's Blues,") are wheeled out as evidence of

¹ Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 23.

Baldwin's representative oeuvre. In contrast, books such as *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* continue to be neglected, highlighted by Quentin Miller's failure to find a critic to write about it.² If scholarship on Baldwin is going to shift again, then it is hoped that more critics will turn to the larger body of his work so that a fuller picture can be formed.

If, as Quentin Miller has claimed, Baldwin's legacy is still uncertain, then a closer examination of the ways in which his work foregrounded and fed into more recent debates about identity politics and the construction of whiteness might stabilise his reputation.³ Baldwin's early and repeated insistence that whiteness is constructed anticipated recent critical writing by several decades. On a more general level, his repeated insistence on self-definition and his suspicion of what is now termed identity politics serves as an important rejoinder to theory's attempts at fixity. Baldwin's repeated insistence that "nothing is fixed, forever and forever," is a pertinent reminder that his own work was continuously evolving,

² D. Quentin Miller, "Introduction," *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, ed. D. Quentin Miller, foreword by David Leeming (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 5.

³ Miller, 3.

highlighting the need to situate it in the flux of the four decades that his writing came out of.

Finally, a closer examination of the importance of spirituality in Baldwin's work might not only help illuminate his writing but point to the ways in which cultural theory is as yet unable or unwilling to grapple with religiousness. As Baldwin's work enters the new millennium, might it be that his insistence on spirituality has foregrounded a more general dissatisfaction with secularity and a return to religiousness in contemporary writing, what Baldwin counseled as the need to "do your first works over?" Whatever Baldwin's legacy becomes, his work still continues to speak across the borders of race, gender, sexuality and religion. As the son of a preacher man, the grand-son of a slave, and a witness to America, Baldwin's voice continues to cry out: "Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but *know whence you came.*"⁴

⁴ James Baldwin, "Introduction," *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's/ Marek, 1985), xix.

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