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# James Baldwin Now

EDITED BY

*Dwight A. McBride*



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## Introduction

*"How Much Time Do You Want for Your Progress?"  
New Approaches to James Baldwin*

Dwight A. McBride

The essays collected here explore not only new ways of thinking about the life and work of James Baldwin, one of the most prolific and influential African American writers ever to live, but also open up new ways in which his work helps us understand many of our contemporary societal problems. Baldwin's life was committed to struggle. He resisted hegemonies in their myriad forms by fighting for racial equality, against elitism both in the United States and abroad, and against the forces of heterosexism both inside and outside the black community. Following the logic of the old Negro spiritual, he once said, "If trouble don't last always, neither does power." And he was unrelenting in his critique of power, as many of the essays here demonstrate. Written as they are by students and scholars who are still in the early stages of their careers, and who either were trained or are being trained in the academy during a time when interdisciplinary work and cultural studies are at what seems their nadir, these essays offer perspectives which are unique, in that they are not shackled by the traditional modes of conducting scholarship but rather are informed by a host of approaches that provide fresh, innovative analyses, distinguishing themselves from much of the earlier work on Baldwin. The company of critics assembled here, composed of a political scientist, sociologists, literary critics, and communicationists, come to Baldwin with different concerns, to be sure. But whatever their critical orientations or questions, all demonstrate that

their thinking has been altered by the challenges that Baldwin's work poses.

Given the advent of cultural studies in the academy—with its focus on interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity, critical theory, and an ever-broadening notion of "culture"—it seems more possible today than ever before to engage Baldwin in all of the complexity he represents to critical inquiry, considering the various roles he has occupied. Baldwin was no more content to be simply a black writer, a gay writer, or an activist than he was to write exclusively in the genre of the novel, drama, poetry, or the essay. Baldwin was, and continues to be, many things to many people. To paraphrase Walt Whitman (in another context), Baldwin is large; he contains multitudes! And Baldwin has spoken to most every issue of great importance in our time. Scholarship, however, has often tended to relegate Baldwin to one or the other of these identity categories. This collection, by design, encourages us to move our thinking, not only of Baldwin but of African American cultural studies generally, in a direction that speaks to the intricate social positions African Americans occupy. Cultural studies work has proven it is possible to think critically about African Americans and African American culture without simply essentializing the category of blackness or appealing to outmoded and problematic notions of black authenticity.

Baldwin himself knew all too well the pitfalls of being at the margins of many identities that were thought to be exclusive (gay and black and American, for example). Sometimes he did the dance of the margins elegantly, but at other times his grace was not adequate to the task. Those times he faltered were emblematic of the dangers of privileging—in our thinking about African Americans—the category of race over all other forms of difference. Baldwin knew all too well this was precisely the move that black antiracist discourse required of him if he was to have the kind of political efficacy with and for African Americans that he ultimately did have in his lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

With the advent of cultural studies, it is finally possible to understand Baldwin's vision of and for humanity in its complexity, locating him not as exclusively gay, black, expatriate, activist, or the like but as an intricately negotiated amalgam of all of those things, which had to be constantly tailored to fit the circumstances in which he was compelled to articulate himself. That is one of the chief goals of this volume of essays. And though the collection is divided into similar cate-

gories for the sake of convenience in organization, the diligent reader will soon find that each of the essays in this volume moves to problematize the very category under which I have placed it. This quality of working within a category of analysis to explode it and to integrate it with other ways of seeing, reading, and analyzing will, I trust, serve as a road map for future critical practice in Baldwin scholarship and in African American cultural studies generally.

Part I of this book, "Baldwin and Race," begins with Marlon B. Ross's masterful essay "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality," which he opens by discussing the deceptively simple problem of whiteness in *Giovanni's Room*. While everybody assumed Baldwin's homosexuality when he wrote *Giovanni's Room*, the fact that it is also a novel about white characters seems to have presented no challenge to Baldwin's racial identity. This foregrounds Ross's discussion of whiteness and sexuality in Baldwin and in the responses of his critics to this work. Ross's analysis is conducted with a degree of subtlety rarely found in critical work on this topic.

Ross's essay transitions nicely to Rebecca Aanerud's piece, "Now More than Ever: James Baldwin and the Critique of White Liberalism," which explores Baldwin's complicated relationship to and critiques of white liberalism. The essay begins with a discussion of the contradictory role of white liberalism as an "antiracist" social category and then positions Baldwin's work in light of that category. Aanerud maintains that Baldwin's critique of white liberalism and white liberals, as well as his use of concepts such as "personal incoherence," "missionary complex," "white liberal as an affliction," and "white guilt," offers an ideal opportunity to evaluate structural and individual responses to racism within a liberal state.

Concluding Part I of the book is Lawrie Balfour's "Finding the Words: Baldwin, Race Consciousness, and Democratic Theory." While much of the critical attention generated by Baldwin's essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" has focused on the question of whether Baldwin's own novels escape his complaints about protest fiction, Balfour revisits the essay to demonstrate that at the same time that Baldwin demolishes the literary value of the protest novel, he also demands an alternative standard for moral and political critique. Baldwin's search, Balfour observes, is for a language to express the wrongs of racial injustice without losing sight of the complicated

workings of race consciousness in American society. Balfour contends that "the ease with which the formal equality guaranteed by the civil rights legislation of the 1960s has been deployed against the purposes of the Civil Rights movement indicates the urgency of Baldwin's warnings about the dangers of disconnecting democratic principles from the lives of the women and men who are expected to abide by them."

Part II, "Baldwin and Sexuality," opens with William J. Spurlin's essay "Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity: James Baldwin and the Identity Politics of Race and Sexuality." Spurlin reexamines Baldwin's literary and cultural reception in the early 1960s in the dominant culture and his reception later in the decade in the U.S. Black Power movement, marking both receptions as themselves interpretive acts. Spurlin focuses on a specific, historicized representation of homosexuality by reading what he calls the "cultural lenses" and "rhetorical practices" that informed interpretations of queer and African American identity in Baldwin and in his work in the 1960s. He sets these in the context of broader social and cultural discourses on homosexuality and race at the time and explores their contemporary social and political implications.

Following Spurlin's essay is Nicholas Boggs's treatment of a rarely discussed text by Baldwin, his children's book *Little Man Little Man: A Story of Childhood*, on an even more rarely discussed topic—a queer, African Americanist exploration of childhood subjectivity. Boggs instructs us that the queer trajectory of Baldwin's text, which is accompanied by the illustrations of Baldwin's close friend Yoran Cazac, can be located in its veiled attention to the lives of black children whose identifications and desires fall outside of the heavily policed boundaries of white hetero-normativity. Yet throughout the text of *Little Man Little Man*, Baldwin and Cazac complicate W. E. B. Du Bois's famous formulation of double consciousness by queering the "twoness" of the black American experience into the triple consciousness of being black, American, and queer.

In a return to one of Baldwin's canonical texts, James A. Dievler's essay "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*," concluding Part II of this book, contends that the novel portrays the devastation wrought in a country dominated by a categorically impoverished sexual culture and offers both a view of and the means of transport to "another country," beyond the confines of the narrow identity cate-

gories that imprisoned Americans in the immediate postwar period. According to Dievler, Baldwin asserts in *Another Country* that all these categories are intertwined and are most effectively transcended through love-based sex—sex that is itself taking place beyond the socially constructed senses of sexuality that have dominated the twentieth century. Dievler writes that Baldwin is "advocating a postcategorical, poststructural concept of sexuality that we might call 'postsexuality.' And he [Baldwin] believes it is only in such a 'country' that the other categories (race, gender) will cease to exist as well."

Beginning Part III on "Baldwin and the Transatlantic" is James Darsey's essay "Baldwin's Cosmopolitan Loneliness." Darsey takes seriously Baldwin's claim that he was a "transatlantic commuter" and the implications that term has for reading Baldwin's work. This is the sensibility that Darsey brings to Baldwin's nuanced analysis of oppression in his famous essay "Everybody's Protest Novel."

Continuing with this transatlantic theme and furthering the analysis of "Everybody's Protest Novel" is Michelle M. Wright's essay "'Alas, Poor Richard!': Transatlantic Baldwin, the Politics of Forgetting, and the Project of Modernity." Why, Wright queries at the beginning of her essay, was "Everybody's Protest Novel" the first essay that Baldwin finished and published while in Paris? She contends that by leaving New York, Baldwin was already expanding his understanding of the African American Subject beyond the mere geographical confines of the "Negro question." "By emphasizing his move to Paris as a move *from* New York, and by splitting with [Richard] Wright publicly, Baldwin suggests that his own understanding of the African American Subject moves beyond national borders," Wright argues. She also warns her reader against oversimplifying the matter, suggesting that Baldwin's understanding of the Subject does fully transcend geographical boundaries but that his understanding also is partially located in the in-between transit itself. In this sense, she concludes, the African American Subject is a transatlantic Subject.

Concluding Part III is Roderick A. Ferguson's essay "The Parvenu Baldwin and the Other Side of Redemption: Modernity, Race, Sexuality, and the Cold War." This chapter historicizes Baldwin's dual interest in race and sexuality within the racial and sexual anxieties of post-World War II America and attempts to address Baldwin's interest in the United States' preoccupation with "color and sex" by situating that preoccupation in the cold war—that is, in the rise of the

United States as a world power and the emergence of the Soviet state as a threat to that power. Ferguson contends that Baldwin's essay "Preservation of Innocence" symbolized "the social contradictions operating in and reconstituted by the post-World War II era. These contradictions included the constitution of an American gay subculture during World War II and the denial/negation of that subculture by the American state immediately after the war. This negation was part of the state's efforts to universalize heterosexual culture and thereby to construct the liberal citizen-subject of the United States as implicitly masculine and heterosexual."

Leading off Part IV, "Baldwin and Intertextuality," is Sharon Patricia Holland's "(Pro)Creating Imaginative Spaces and Other Queer Acts: Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Its Revival of James Baldwin's Absent Black Gay Man in *Giovanni's Room*." Holland begins her essay, echoing the concerns of Marlon Ross in Chapter 1, with the express task of devising a means by which "black" and "queer" can speak to each other. This is most effectively achieved in this chapter by engaging and, indeed, by queering the idea of the African American literary tradition through an intertextual reading of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* with Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*. The result is an elucidation of the "particular imaginative place/space that black gay men occupy in the literary 'tradition'" and specifically in Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, which signifies on Baldwin's earlier text and attempts to re-create an imaginative place for black gay experience in the African American tradition.

In his essay "'I'm Not Entirely What I Look Like': Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and the Hegemony of Vision; Or, Jimmy's FBEye Blues," Maurice Wallace marshals an impressive range of cultural evidence to revisit the relationship between Baldwin and Wright in a markedly different way than that taken by others who have addressed it, in this book and elsewhere in the past. Wallace's chapter looks backward to the unfulfilled criminographic, that is, the examination of black case studies, ambitions of *American Pages* (a magazine that Wright and company were never able to start, which was to address contemporary Negro concerns) and to Wright's implicit panoptic critique of his unfulfilled intended exhibition on black criminal subjects, in order to examine their influence on the fictional designs of book 3 of *Native Son*. This allows Wallace to look forward, later—by way of a reading of the FBI's files on Baldwin—at the scopic exer-

cises of the criminographic imagination upon Baldwin's queer black body.

Josh Kun's essay "Life according to the Beat: James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, and the Perilous Sounds of Love," appropriately concludes this section on intertextuality with attention to one of the influences on Baldwin's work that Baldwin himself was quick to recognize but which his critics have largely ignored: music. Kun's chapter helps fill that critical gap. Returning to the time Baldwin spent in Switzerland in his mountain retreat, where he completed his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and two essays of note, "A Stranger in the Village" and "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," Kun troubles over the significance of the music of Bessie Smith that Baldwin took with him to that retreat. "We know of James Baldwin the writer," he writes, "but what do we know of James Baldwin the listener?" This essay intervenes in the technological gaps between typewriter and phonograph and provides some illuminating insights.

Part V, explicitly devoted to "Baldwin and the Literary," consists of two essays and a thorough select bibliography, compiled and introduced by Jeffrey W. Hole, that is sure to be useful to Baldwin scholars for some time to come. This section opens with Joshua L. Miller's "The Discovery of What It Means to Be a Witness: James Baldwin's *Dialectics of Difference*," which gives as much attention to the influence of the visual on Baldwin's work as Kun's chapter does to the musical. By centering on an examination of *Nothing Personal*, Baldwin's collaborative project with his friend Richard Avedon, Miller carefully unravels and illuminates the intricacies of the term *witness* for and in the work and life of Baldwin.

Finally, Lauren Rusk's "Selfhood and Strategy in *Notes of a Native Son*" speaks to how James Baldwin's first collection of essays portrays his personal experience of the ill-fitting, anonymous role inflicted on African Americans by white society. Rusk shows how *Notes of a Native Son*, a work of rhetorical life writing, speaks to an audience divided by racial difference: "In it, Baldwin pulls out all the stops to demonstrate, especially to white readers, the pathological relations between and essential kinship of black and white Americans."

The title of my introduction, taken as it is from a comment Baldwin made in a televised interview, responds to an old sentiment often attributed to well-meaning white liberals: that is, racial progress takes time.<sup>2</sup> A younger Baldwin might have had more patience with such



an assertion, but an exasperated older Baldwin, near the end of his life, did not. It is in this context that Baldwin replies to the reporter, "It has taken my mother's time, my father's time, my brothers and my sisters' time, my nieces and my nephews' time. . . . How much time do you want for your progress?" With a slight shift in focus, one could ask the same pointed question of much of the secondary criticism of Baldwin's work to date. What strikes one most on excursions into the secondary works on Baldwin is the critics' and commentators' fascination with not just Baldwin's work but with Baldwin the man, Baldwin the thinker, Baldwin the activist. No fewer than four full-length biographical works on Baldwin exist, from Fern Marja Eckman's *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (New York: M. Evans, 1966), to W. J. Weatherby's *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (1989), James Campbell's *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (1992), and finally David Leeming's *James Baldwin: A Biography* (1994). In addition to these are numerous interviews with and personal recollections about Baldwin, some of which have been collected and published. Quincy Troupe edited such a collection of recollections by writers, critics, and other artists in *James Baldwin: The Legacy* (1989). And Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt edited a collection of interviews that appeared in 1989 in *Conversations with James Baldwin*.

These, along with the 1989 documentary *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*; countless other interviews; the number of appearances Baldwin's words make as an epigraph in films, by directors ranging from Marlon Riggs to Spike Lee; the allusions to Baldwin in contemporary black gay fiction, as in James Earl Hardy's *B-Boy Blues*; the number of times that Baldwin has been quoted in African American literary and cultural criticism from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to Cornel West, all suggest not only Baldwin's centrality but that he was of interest to an entire generation and continues to be of interest to a new generation of scholars, readers, and culture producers for reasons that exceed his mere textual acumen and dexterity. The fascination is with Baldwin's life, his presence, his political thought, as well as his work. This is evidenced by the paucity of real critical treatment of Baldwin's work in favor of the more biographical portraits of the man.

This book of essays represents a Baldwin revival of sorts. Since 1990, some fifteen dissertations have been written on Baldwin, either in whole or in part, from a variety of disciplines. Some of the writers

of those dissertations are among the authors in this collection. This critical mass may point to a return to Baldwin in a way that might not have been possible ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago. It is common fare in critical discourse today to talk of transnationality and the new ways in which that category requires us to understand other categories, such as identity. The fact that we can today think about the complicated relationships that not only obtain but are inevitable between race, gender, class, and sexuality makes possible a reassessment and a critical treatment of Baldwin that perhaps was not before imaginable. And who better to make those reevaluations and interventions than a group of younger scholars, represented by those collected here, who were trained in the academy just as it was realizing the impact of cultural studies on critical thought. The chapters that follow signal not only a new direction for Baldwin scholarship but a new day for African American cultural critique. As new scholarship continues to emerge, the centrality and exemplarity of Baldwin to this new critical terrain will, no doubt, continue to come into sharper focus.

#### NOTES

1. For a fuller discussion of this idea of the primacy of the category of race over all other categories of difference, see Dwight A. McBride, "Can the Queen Speak?: Racial Essentialism, Sexuality and the Problem of Authority," *Callaloo* 21, 2 (1998): 363-379.
2. For a textual discussion of this idea, see "Preface to the 1984 edition of *Notes of a Native Son*, by James Baldwin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

## Baldwin and Race

## White Fantasies of Desire

### *Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality*

Marlon B. Ross

Both clung to a fantasy rather than to each other, tried to suck pleasure from the crannies of the mind, rather than surrender the secrets of the body.

—Baldwin, *Another Country*<sup>1</sup>

It is quite possible to say that the price a Negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about.

—Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*<sup>2</sup>

The only way to claim the legitimacy of your desire when the dominant culture fears it is to pretend desire can be exposed to light, can be discussed, analyzed, categorized, mapped, recorded—to pretend it is a surface phenomenon. This act of exposure not only distorts the course of desire; it also has no choice but to express desire in terms the culture has already provided. Your desire and its articulation will resist those terms, just as homosexuals took the trivializing epithet *gay* and transformed it into a term indicating a legitimate cultural group with a powerful political base, seeking to overturn their sexual oppression. Always residual in the term *gay*, however, will be mainstream society's terrified projection of intragender bonding; it is a term always on the verge of suggesting a decadent individual who trivializes society's grandest natural and moral directive to reproduce: pansy, punk, sissy, fag.

No matter how articulate an oppressed group may be, they cannot fully explain what it feels like to inhabit a society that represses their desire, not only because feelings are notoriously internal but also because expression is notoriously decided. What Baldwin has said about African American experience can also be applied to intragender desire: "No true account really of black life can be held, can be contained in the American vocabulary. As it is, the only way that you can deal with it is by doing great violence to the assumptions on which the vocabulary is based."<sup>3</sup> We have to communicate in the very language that has articulated oppression as a viable existence, but by doing so, we reveal how that language and that culture belong to us in ways that put the secure grasp of dominant culture at risk. The only option is to divert language toward in-group cultural expression, which dominant society will have a hard time deciphering but nevertheless will endlessly decipher and exploit for its own ends. The desire of the oppressed is put on the defensive even as it finds its borrowed language. The question is always "What do you want?" It is easy for a group whose desire is suppressed to spend a lot of energy trying to answer that question, not only because an answer is vital to sustaining the myth of collective desire, strength in solidarity, but also because *not* to answer the question leaves you in an even more vulnerable position. Needless to say, as you field the question and invent answers, the oppressors are busy making those answers fit the straitjacket of their projected fear. "We want exactly what you want" is never a good enough answer.

When desire is involved, sometimes the most direct route to a solution is a detour. In this case, we advance to the topic of African American intragender desire by way of the detour of two stories written by black men about (white) homosexuality. In 1956, James Baldwin took a great risk in publishing one of the earliest affirmative American novels on an overtly homosexual topic, a novel that has become a foundational text for gay culture and for gay and lesbian studies; although in canonizing this text, the field has done so at the expense of the novel's racial implications. Adding to this risk was the fact that all the characters in his novel were "white," though we shall see how relative a notion whiteness can be. According to Fern Marja Eckman, Baldwin went into a deep depression upon completing *Giovanni's Room*.<sup>4</sup>

The homosexual theme had initially frightened Baldwin; now it made the publishers draw back. But they issued paternalistic warnings to Baldwin that they were rejecting the book for his own good, really, since publication would surely "wreck" his career.

"They said I would—I was a *Negro* writer and I would reach a very special audience," Baldwin says now. "And I would be *dead* if I alienated that audience. That, in effect, nobody would accept that book—coming from *me*." His eyes smolder. "My agent told me to *burn* it."<sup>5</sup>

Baldwin's fear and the publishers' predictions, though inauspicious, contained a kernel of truth. The immediate critical reception to *Giovanni's Room* in the mainstream media was cautiously positive. After all, the novel seemed like a curious little detour, which is how it is still frequently treated. What did white men have to lose from mildly praising such a novel? In fact, much of that praise seems predicated on the unstated element of surprise that a black author would attempt such a project and astonishment that he could succeed in constructing white characters. In *The Gay Novel in America*, James Levin sums up the attitude of these first white reviewers: "Baldwin could write about homosexuality because his literary reputation had been confirmed and because those who wished to support him as a black writer refrained from attacking him on what seemed to be an extraneous or possibly detrimental issue [homosexuality]."<sup>6</sup> The longer critical history of *Giovanni's Room* reveals the deeper discomfort entailed in the reception to Baldwin's treatment of this "extraneous or possibly detrimental issue."

From its publication to the present, *Giovanni's Room* has been read as a homosexual novel, exposing the fact that desire between men can be mapped without making desire itself a scandal. Baldwin's first book, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (which depicts the emotional, economic, racial, and spiritual struggles of a first-generation Harlem family), published in 1953, is considered one of the most powerful novels depicting the African American experience.<sup>7</sup> In his first novel, the black man speaks; in his second, the homosexual. Only with the emergence of a more autonomous gay black sociopolitical consciousness in the early 1980s did a public discourse arise that began to integrate Baldwin's "gay" novel into an African American context. It is as if only an openly gay black readership could give a valid racial

identity to a novel otherwise cut off from black experience, and it is no surprise that Baldwin's work as a whole has been a major cultural resource for people who identify as black and gay. Nonetheless, the easy categorization of the first novels projects onto them the very denials that Baldwin was attempting to bring to the surface, and the potential ghettoization of Baldwin as an author "for" black gay people also contains assumptions against which his work struggles. Everyone assumed that Baldwin was homosexual because he had chosen to write a novel about same-gender love. This is ironic, considering that as a black man, he was also writing a novel about "white" characters in which whiteness itself—or Baldwin's own blackness—was apparently not an issue. Fortunately, no one could accuse Baldwin of secretly being white simply because he had written a novel with all European characters. Of course, *a secret desire to be white* is another matter, another sort of accusation, and one implied or made outright in much of the criticism until quite recently. While the novel has gained a central place in (white) gay culture and is often a focus of attention in (white) gay studies, in the context of African American literary and cultural studies, historically it has been alternately dismissed or ignored altogether, stumbingly acknowledged or viciously attacked.

Apologetics and abuse sometimes have characterized the same discussion, whereby the critic justifies Baldwin's right to publish such a novel but then chastises him for having done so. Nathan A. Scott, Jr., for instance, writes about *Giovanni's Room* that it "is a book that strikes us as a deflection, as a kind of detour," whereas *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is "a passionate gesture of identification with his people."<sup>8</sup> The clear implication is that *Giovanni's Room* is not "a passionate gesture of identification" with African American culture, that in fact it is a deviation from such identification. In *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone, a white critic who has been influential in black literary studies, classifies *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* (Baldwin's third novel) with a genre of "raceless novels" written by African Americans during the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>9</sup> Bone argues that Baldwin equates spiritual salvation with interracial homosexuality: "The stranger the sex partner, the better the orgasm, for it violates a stronger taboo. Partners of a different race, or the same sex, or preferably both, afford the maximum spiritual opportunities" (238).

In *White Papers for White Americans*, Calvin C. Hernton takes Bone's logic of racial estrangement a step further: "Psychologically, [Bald-

win] 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, that is, if God did not change his life."<sup>10</sup> Baldwin almost redeems himself for Hernton after writing the play *Blues for Mister Charlie*.<sup>11</sup> "This Baldwin—the *Blues for Mister Charlie* Baldwin—is an aggressive, a masculine Baldwin. Add to this the fact that the sexuality of the Negroes in the play is earthy, rich, full of power and human animalism, all of which Baldwin does not apologize for, but which he affirms with dignity and prowess" (131). Splitting Baldwin in two in order to salvage his legitimacy as a racial spokesman, Hernton suggests that *Blues* is a better work than *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*, because it does not harbor any tincture of same-sex desire, which by implication here becomes concern with nonblack desire.<sup>12</sup>

In a now infamous passage of *Soul on Ice*, where homosexuality is compared with "baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors," Eldridge Cleaver achieves the nadir of homophobic ranting against Baldwin's sexual, and therefore racial, perversion:

Many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their 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.<sup>13</sup>

In Cleaver's vision of Baldwin's desire for blond homosexuals, he curiously assumes a rigid bifurcation of sexual roles in male-male intercourse and, further, that the black man must take the "feminine" position of the "bottom," while the white man automatically takes the "masculine" role of the "top." According to Cleaver's racial logic—or more precisely, illogic—black homosexual desire is ultimately desire for whiteness, desire to vacate black manhood for an abject position appropriate only to the white female. By castigating Baldwin and praising Norman Mailer and his idea of black masculine sexual superiority, however, Cleaver casts aside an opportunity for racial solidarity with a black man in favor of putatively "straight" male bonding with a white man. The irony is painfully apparent, suggesting that it



is Cleaver, not Baldwin, who desires to be inseminated by the white father.

The complexities of Cleaver's cross-identifications are too entangled to unravel here, but it must be remembered that Baldwin (especially his *The Fire Next Time*) was the writer who most influenced the young male generation of 1960s militant writers, including Cleaver himself.<sup>14</sup> Even as Cleaver writes under the palpable influence of Baldwin's distinctive blend of the personal, philosophical, and political, and even as the younger writer borrows from his elder the tactic of sexual exposure in order to understand racial entanglements, he attempts to distance himself from Baldwin's sexual stance by creating a posture of conventionally coded aggressive manliness, ironically bolstered by his bonding with Baldwin's white rival, Mailer.<sup>15</sup>

Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s "The Embattled Craftsman" is an especially instructive essay in this context, for in it Baker attempts to undo some of the damage done to Baldwin's racial image as a result of homophobic attacks on the part of some advocates of Black Power.<sup>16</sup> Baker wants to rescue Baldwin's seminal place in the canon of African American literature and culture, as opposed to the inseminated position in a miscegenated relation to white culture given him by some of the late 1960s militants. Instead of claiming a place for sexual variation in the African American canon, and thus in black culture, Baker opts to celebrate Baldwin's concern with race by diminishing the writer's interest in the relation between sexual variation and racial identity. Although the essay seeks to reinstate Baldwin as a worthy black father by focusing on his craft, it does so by establishing African American culture as the exclusive center of Baldwin's work. Baker leaves *Giovanni's Room* out of his analysis except for asides in the discussion of other works, and he glosses over the significance of intra-gender desire in Baldwin's other writings. The dis/stress in logic found in Baker's transition from *Another Country* to *The Fire Next Time* is emblematic of this tactical reconstruction of racial identity and tradition at the expense of same-sex desire: "It hardly seems overstatement to say *Another Country* is not a prolegomenon for a homosexual revolution. And when one turns to *The Fire Next Time*, one can see how the novel fits into a total corpus" (69). Because the homosexual theme is not overtly continued in *The Fire Next Time* (though it is there subtly and circuitously), Baker assumes we need not consider the issue of same-gender desire in light of Baldwin's further develop-

ment and his politics of race. It could be easily argued that *Another Country* is exactly a prolegomenon for a revolution that is (homo)sexual and racial simultaneously, that the fire next time cannot merely be a fire that sears the racial existence of Americans but also must be one that disrupts their sexual psychology. As Baldwin asserts consistently throughout his work, the reform of racial relations must be total if it is to happen at all, and it cannot happen at all without a concomitant revolution in Americans' psycho-erotica. Baker constructs a "total corpus" as total and enlists Baldwin as a genuine son of the African American tradition by excising Baldwin's black faggotry from that corpus and thus from that tradition. This need not be the case, and given Baldwin's belief that sexual knowledge and exposure are crucial to racial understanding and progress, it should not be the case.<sup>17</sup>

Because Baldwin himself links the most explicit, open, and socially autonomous form of homosexuality to white characters in his early novels, it could be argued that these critics are simply taking Baldwin at his word. In contrast to the cross-racial same-gender relationships engaged in by Rufus Scott in *Another Country*, it is not until 1968, with the publication of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, that Baldwin emplots overt sexual relations between two black men in a novel, and not until 1979 with *Just Above My Head*, his last novel, that he explores love between two black men, both of whom express their sexuality in an "exclusively" same-gender bond (as opposed to being "bisexual" like Rufus of *Another Country* or like Leo Proudhammer in *Tell Me How Long*).<sup>18</sup> From Baldwin's early work, in which "out" homosexuality is mostly associated with whiteness, a reader already uncomfortable with sexual variance may lessen that level of discomfort by segregating blackness from intragender desire. We could say, then, that important critics such as Scott and Baker picked up on Baldwin's own discomfort with representing sexual variance as integral to African American experience in the earlier novels. At the least, however, we must recognize that Baldwin's engagement with this relationship between same-sexuality and race takes the form of a progressive, consistent thinking through, rather than something quixotic, sporadic, regressive, or exculpatory—an intentionally politicized engagement rather than a whimsical detour.

Baldwin was not the first black male writer to choose the apparently curious option of treating male homosexuality through the fictional experience of white characters, if not from a white point of

view. In 1952, Chester Himes published *Cast the First Stone*, a novel depicting intragender romance in a prison setting and pleading for understanding of sexual variation.<sup>19</sup> Like Baldwin's, Himes's "handsome" white hero at first resists same-sex desire, then falls in love with a darker, younger man, who identifies himself more comfortably with the capacity for intragender intercourse. As in Baldwin's novel, the white hero leaves the younger, darker, more sexually articulated male just when the younger man needs him most. Like Baldwin, Himes uses first-person narration, putting us inside the head of the resistant hero and bringing our sympathies in line with his, teaching us as readers as he learns for himself through his firsthand experience of homoerotic love. Himes also provides an "exotic" setting for his story of same-sex love, and in the work of both Baldwin and Himes, the love is simultaneously articulated and cramped by the couple's literal or symbolic imprisonment in a claustrophobic space: in Baldwin, by Giovanni's room; in Himes, by the prison. Like Baldwin's Paris, Himes's prison is another country, where sexual bonding between men is much more part of the surface of life than in respectable (white, middle-class) American society.

Both authors end their homosexual fantasies tragically. In both novels we must question the heroes' culpability in not being able to fulfill their lovers' emotional needs. In each novel the more sexually self-accepting character comes to a fatal end—Baldwin's through execution, Himes's through suicide. Unable to integrate his love into a society that condemns it and turns it into prostitution, Baldwin's Giovanni becomes a hunted criminal and then a broken prisoner, awaiting execution. Himes's association of homosexuality and imprisonment is the other side of the coin: when the hero is released from prison, his lover is left alone and broken. The hero's initial criminal behavior in the "outside" (i.e., "normal") world ironically has given him access to a room, a prison cell, where he can discover his passion for another man (without actual contamination of sexual intercourse), and he is able to leave this "inside" world behind after he has learned—or in Baldwin's novel, has *not* learned—from its deviance. As in Baldwin's, in Himes's novel society's rules demand punishment, as the bereft younger man takes his own life.

Finally, there is evidence for autobiographical elements in both novels, and both writers rewrite their white fantasies in other versions—Baldwin incorporating his into *Another Country*, with a black

hero who has an affair with a white homosexual from another country (France); Himes changing the color of his characters from black to white in the final version.

If Baldwin's critical history is shaped by an attempt to segregate race from sexuality, Himes's reception has an analogous history—but with major differences. *Cast the First Stone* was greeted negatively by the critical establishment; then it was generally forgotten, unlike *Giovanni's Room*.<sup>20</sup> As H. Bruce Franklin has pointed out, recent reassessments of Himes's work have focused on the later hard-boiled detective fiction rather than the early prison fiction.<sup>21</sup> Just as for Baldwin, the tide turned against Himes's early work, especially during the Black Power period, because of the prevalence of cross-racial sexuality in those largely autobiographical protest novels. Intimately related to this crossover dynamic in their fiction is the protest tradition in which both Himes and Baldwin wrote but which both were constantly trying to write themselves out of in the early novels. It is no coincidence that some of the black nationalists, in turning against the fictional representation of crossover sexuality, also turned against the protest tradition itself—a tradition that takes racial integration as a fundamental solution to the problem of racism and focuses on the need to improve race *relations*, the struggle to reconcile black and white into a single egalitarian national culture. The slippage that ties interracial relations with interracial sexual relations has operated in American culture since before emancipation, and it has been an important theme among African American writers across the political spectrum and throughout the literary tradition. This slippage has been figured as a sign for the im/possibility of racial reconciliation. When Himes resorts to writing detective novels, he is giving up on revising the form of the protest novel altogether; but this does not mean he gives up on the searching themes contained in the earlier fiction, as can be seen from the presence of black faggotry in some of the detective fiction.

Given the uncanny similarity between *Cast the First Stone* and *Giovanni's Room* (suggesting that Baldwin may have known the earlier novel), the different reception—or lack thereof—of Himes in sexuality and gay-lesbian studies helps us grasp the racial implications of how Baldwin's work has been exploited in these fields. Most of Himes's crime novels take place in Harlem, giving us the justly celebrated black detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones,

with their hard, quiet, relentless, masculine, understated charm. For the later Himes, visibly black and traditionally masculine, to gain the upper hand, the early Himes, preoccupied with interracial relations and sexual variance, must be disciplined through a formulaic genre whose gender and sexuality are highly conventional. Whereas Baldwin's articulation of same-gender desire becomes more comprehensive and integrated into his vision of African American tradition and community, so that "deviance"—a refusal to accept the unloving inhumanities of the norm—comes to represent the most sacred values of that tradition, Himes goes in the other direction. His concern with same-gender desire becomes—not silenced, exactly—whisperingly voiced through the apparently conventional bonding of two apparently "straight" detectives and their occasional policing of others' deviant sexuality. In his detective novels, Himes continues to explore variant sexuality through the frame of this formulaic coupling of Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones. Just as the formula of male bonding is rerouted and exploded through the eyes of this passionately, quietly bonded black male couple, however, so the sexual crimes that these detectives must solve are reoriented by a landscape of variant sexual practices depicted as so routine in Harlem that dealing with their expression is second nature to the detectives.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the vigilance of gay and lesbian studies scholars when it comes to resurrecting homosexual works, *Cast the First Stone* remains unexamined in the scholarship. Because Himes was reputedly straight, his novel was not prone to canonization under the cult of gay personality, which identifies gay literature as the production of writers who must themselves be identifiably (or arguably) gay—a tendency that has been hard to overcome, despite some excellent theoretical work on why it is problematic.<sup>23</sup> Himes's writing does not possess the odd double life (a queer version for gay and sexuality studies, a black version for African American and race studies) that Baldwin's has been subjected to, despite the fact that homosexuality is a theme that shows up repeatedly in Himes's work.

Perhaps even more important, *Cast the First Stone* is unknown in the gay community and in the scholarship because of its class position. Homosexuality has been coded in mainstream discourses since the 1960s not only as a largely white, male phenomenon but also as a white, middle-class phenomenon. Prison homosexuality is still seen by many as a different animal from authentic gay desire, because it is

scripted in dominant literary and popular culture largely as behavior forced out as a result of circumstance, coercion, or confusion of gender roles where there are no women to play the passive part.<sup>24</sup> "The novel is a highly detailed account of one man's prison term," Stephen F. Milliken writes. "Prison is its one and only subject, its unique and exclusive concern."<sup>25</sup> What Milliken means here is that racism has been curiously cordoned off, though race exists in the novel in the form of black "background" characters. Similar to Baker's approach to Baldwin, however, Milliken's rush to explain the centrality of race—or in this case, to blast its central absence—causes him to erase the novel's interest in sexual variance among men. In other words, there is no one, central concern in the novel but a myriad of concerns matrixed through the characteristics of race, sexuality, class, and criminality. As long as these characteristics are viewed as single aspects of identity and difference, however, they will always be viewed as competing, rather than as messily intertwined concerns which can be isolated neither in experience nor in its representation. Not only does the prison experience overshadow the role of variant sexuality in Milliken's reading; it also overshadows the symbolic and literal interconnections between the prison experience and racial oppression, so that Milliken is unable to see the novel's racial implications:

And in making Jimmy Monroe white, Himes effected an even more drastic narrowing of scope. He eliminated the entire subject of racism, the central theme of his first two novels. It is the most radical change imaginable, a basic alteration in the nature of the reality portrayed. But racism is not an easy truth for an artist to handle. . . . It distorts and obscures all lesser or subtler truths. . . .

To remove racism from consideration, in any story of modern society that aims at completeness, is, of course, much like taking the sun out of the firmament. It is a massive distortion, leaving a gaping hole. It does, however, throw into sharper relief myriad points of detail that are normally blurred. (160, 161)

Unable to see the connections between class, racial, sexual, and penal oppressions, Milliken overlooks the very plausible possibility that, rather than Himes's having totally purged the question of racial oppression from the novel, what he has done is emplot both the issue of color and the question of same-sex desire as notions isolated in discourse but not in experience. If this only book-length critical study of

Himes is an indication, the response to *Cast the First Stone*, once the novel becomes better known, might suffer from the same double blindness that has characterized so much of the criticism on *Giovanni's Room*. Rather than seeing *Giovanni's Room* and *Cast the First Stone* as unfortunate detours that take the authors away from their only legitimate concern, readers should approach both novels attuned to the ways in which intragender desire has been historically situated within African American culture and to the kinds of cultural knowledge that enable Baldwin and Himes to write these texts as fantasies of white male desire. To do otherwise is to miss both the historical complexity of forms of erotic desire and the cultural complexity of African American desire itself.

Although the dual existence of Baldwin's works and the oblivion of Himes's in queer studies many stem from a complex network of reasons, their different receptions indicate to what extent identity has been formulated as a base of singular experience, determining how a writer is identified and critiqued.<sup>26</sup> The recent rash of rhetoric concerning dual and triple identities, interrelated, combined, and performed identities, has not uprooted the base paradigm of singularity, one in which the logic is curiously additive, and in which race dominates self-consciously when blackness is at stake and silently when white people take their own sexuality—homo or hetero—as an unarticulated norm for everyone else's. Baldwin may be seen to have a dual identity, but in this paradigm the characteristics of race and sexuality always compete for dominance. When it comes to identity, only one, master characteristic is possible; all others search for a place to settle within the framework of that master characteristic.<sup>27</sup> Both Baldwin and Himes were attempting to uncover this scandal of "identity." Through their fiction, they were suggesting that identification occurs through the pressure of circumstance on impulse; that the most uptight Puritan blue blood (Baldwin's hero) and the most reckless Southern redneck (Himes's hero) can, under the right circumstances, find their desire reconstructed by their erotic passion for another man. That both writers felt compelled to darken this other man, to make him ethnically other, so to speak, indicates to what extent they understood the insufficiency of identity to account for the (im)balancing acts of desire's unpredictable attractions and identifications. Both the heroes and the men they come to desire represent not necessarily the authors themselves but the capacity for these writers to fantasize, to identify with another through the axis of desire. Does sex-

ual difference look more like racial difference than we'd suppose, they ask, not so much in its historical formation as in its structure of felt experience?

The reception to *Giovanni's Room*, then, has disallowed Baldwin's attempt to bracket the question "What does Baldwin want?" One obvious answer is that Baldwin wanted to prove that once the black man becomes articulate, he does have something to say, and he can say it in whatever color he chooses. If the characters had been black, the novel would have been read as being "about" blackness, whatever else it happened actually to be about. The whiteness of the characters seems to make invisible the question of how race or color has, in fact, shaped the characters—at least as far as most readers have dealt with the novel. Nobody asks, What does the white man want?—even though a large chunk of the novel shows us a specific fictional white man asking himself relentlessly, What is it exactly that I want? In other words, Baldwin revises W. E. B. Du Bois's question "How does it feel to be a problem?" For Baldwin, it is not "the strange meaning of being black" that is the "problem of the Twentieth Century," nor even "the problem of the color-line."<sup>28</sup> Baldwin makes the central problem of the twentieth century the strange meaning of being white, as a structure of feeling within the self and within history—a structure of felt experience that motivates and is motivated by other denials. In *Giovanni's Room* he posits the white man as a problem and then fantasizes what it might mean for a particular upper-class white man to become aware of the problematic nature of his desire—color not as a "line" of demarcation but instead as a point of departure. Given the invisibility of whiteness as a racially constricted burden of desire, however, Baldwin also shows how even the most deeply taboo and widely outlawed desire can be cushioned by the privileged invisibility of whiteness.<sup>29</sup>

Color is usually taken as merely a surface matter in *Giovanni's Room* meaning that it is a matter of mere description rather than identity—the instance of a characteristic rather than the essence of character. The two lovers, David and Giovanni, are specific instances of individuals with representative (white?) problems that need human (white?) solutions. Their race signifies nothing beyond itself. It is merely a way of observing what they look like, not why it is that they want whatever it is they want. Baldwin, however, refers to color and racial characteristics constantly as a way of locating the cultural