

Zealous Watchmen: Racial Authenticity, Masculine Anxiety and the Black Arts Movement

By

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## Abstract

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This project complicates and deepens black feminist and queer critiques that the Black Arts Movement (BAM) deployed misogyny and homophobia in the service of a masculinist vision of black liberation. Specifically, emphasizing the role of homosocial discourse in marshaling intraracial terms of black (in)authenticity. *Zealous Watchmen* proposes that key themes that mark Black Arts works—homophobic language, accusations of race treachery and of mimicry of purportedly white literary style, ambivalent observations of the “misguided masculinity” of black street hustlers—mutually constitute one another’s meaning around a common axis: the intent of the Black Arts authors not only to discipline but to emasculate other black men. I argue that bold proclamations regarding one’s status as a *real* black man were coupled with habitual accusations of failed black manhood articulated through a range of literary signifiers.

Taking on the Black Arts’ most bombastic assertions of masculinity, as well as some of its more subtle rhetorical formulations, my analysis of textual discourse takes seriously the colloquial plea of “that’s not what I mean by that word(s),” probing it further, then, to ask what they *did* mean. Why use *that word*, towards such an end? What other words did BAM writers use to a comparable end? From what referential framework does this network of words and refrains draw? *Zealous Watchman* seeks to define and interrogate terms taken up by key Black Power/Black Arts intellectuals meant to signify black male failure. I do so in the interest of teasing out how seemingly disparate terms of disparagement intersect in their intent to define and police the boundaries of black masculine authenticity. In each chapter I orient my close reading of a canonical BAM text through one of the following key themes: *homophobia*, *race traitorousness*, *authorial angst*, and ostensive *misguided masculinity* and show them to be wedded in a mutually constitutive semiotic discourse. My study complicates how what can be read as distinct rhetorical challenges to authentic blackness and masculinity, should be understood as co-constitutive. I will argue this concentricity resulted in emasculative claims doubling as claims of racial failure and vice versa. While racial authenticity was the ultimate issue in Black Arts literature, I argue an unsteady and anxiety-ridden discourse of masculinity mediated and made legible compliance or disobedience to *real* blackness.

Chapter 1 considers James Baldwin’s curious usage of homophobic epithets in *No Name in the Street* in response to Eldridge Cleaver’s notorious personal attacks to posit the discursive figure of the “faggot” as a non-sexual specific signifier of male abjection. Chapter 2 reads Amiri Baraka’s landmark play, *Dutchman*, to explicate the figure of the “Uncle Tom” as illustrative of

the symbiotic relationship between tropes of interracial heterosexual desire, racial traitorousness, and effeminized white maleness. Chapter 3 uses the formative anthology *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro American Writing* to survey the seemingly banal designation of “authorship” as a threatening abstraction from virile manhood that manifests as an articulation of racial angst. Chapter 4 steps beyond paragons of Black Arts and considers the virtual silence of Black Arts toward the alleged “misguided masculinity” prominent in the urban realism of pulp fiction novelist Donald Goines.

Engaging with scholars across the fields of African American Studies, English, cultural history and gender and sexuality theory *Zealous Watchmen* contributes to the emergent interdisciplinary sub-field of Black Masculinity Studies. In the words of influential male feminist scholar, Michael Awkward, Masculinity Studies problematize the “unproblematized perceptions of monolithic and normative maleness.” In the case of *Black Masculine Studies* this entails the specific problematizing of, to borrow the phrasing of Darieck Scott, “blackened” maleness. The thematic focus of my project interrogates and disassembles notions of, or expectations for, a singular authentic black masculine identity within a cultural site where authentic masculinity was a core ambition. *Zealous Watchmen* shows that the reiterations of black masculinity set in dialectical relationship to those of negated black masculinity, and the fact of their chronic reiteration, serve as evidence that the Black Arts black masculine ideal was not, nor ever could be, realized.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	
By Way of Apology: Amiri Baraka, <i>Home</i> and Reassessing Black Arts Movement Homosocial Discourse	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>13</b>
Meeting at the Watch Tower: James Baldwin’s <i>No Name in the Street</i> and the Re-Sexing of Homophobic Vernacular	
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>42</b>
Trying to Grow a Beard: Amiri Baraka’s <i>Dutchman</i> , Interracial Sex and the Latent Threat of the “Uncle Tom”	
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>66</b>
Poems That Shoot Guns: The Masculine Crisis of Black Black Authorship in <i>Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing</i>	
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>88</b>
Never Die Alone: Misguided Masculinity and the Marginalization of Donald Goines	
<b>Afterword</b>	<b>127</b>
Life After Death: Notorious BIG, The Last Poets and Making Manhood in the Shadow of the Black Arts	
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>132</b>

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## Introduction

### By Way of Apology: Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays*, and Reassessing Black Arts Movement Homosocial Discourse

*Home: Social Essays* is the formative collection of Amiri Baraka's most critical stage of political evolution, his turn towards Black Nationalism; a turn that, upon completion, found him on its frontline. Over the previous decade Baraka (at the time [1965] still known as Leroi Jones) had cultivated his literary voice as an editor and author of beat poetry, acclaimed theatre and timely jazz theory. However, unlike the concerted study of his breakout work of music criticism, *Blues People*, or the fantastic realism of plays like *The Baptism* and *Dutchman*, *Home* reads as an assemblage of editorial meditations on social and political topics. Consisting of twenty-four essays *Home* chronologically charts Baraka's dramatic political awakening in Cuba (1960) to his vanguard forcefulness on the cusp of the Black Arts Movement (1965). The collection is noteworthy as a marker of pivotal transitions, following his development from nearly lone black figure of New York's downtown bohemian milieu<sup>1</sup> to foremost literati of Black Nationalism. In the collection's introduction, also titled "Home," Baraka stages his essays that range in topic from the culinary to the heavyweight division as unified by a shared commitment to what he describes as his personal "movement."<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the essays are to be understood as articulating his *process* of racial self-becoming. Or, better still, his process of racial *re*-becoming: his return to selfhood, his return "Home" to blackness. Baraka explains that this cathartic, be it at times difficult, practice of self-discovery is continuous and thus necessarily still in process. Indeed, in the final sentence of the introduction Baraka tells readers, "By the time this book appears I will be even blacker."<sup>3</sup>

This final sentence suggests that for Baraka racial self-becoming was steadfast. The resolute nature of black becoming was largely a consequence of a habitual passage through corrosive obstacles, namely those of western (i.e. white) cultural imposition. As such, blackness is a nebulous "home"; something to *become* never solely to *be*, at least not without the specter of possible remission. Written in the heat of his process, Baraka's prefatory remarks came at a moment of climatic metamorphosis rather than measured retrospective. For as noted 1965 was, in the porous terms of historiography, the dawn of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) with Baraka poised to be its literary quintessence and ideological principle. He was, largely in the evaluation of his own terms, as predicted, undoubtedly blacker than ever when the collection *Home* appeared in print in 1966. However, Baraka's interpretation of blackness would famously continue to transform, and not as he would have predicted, or likely desired, in 1966.

In 2009, the year of Baraka's 75th birthday, *Home* was reissued with the addition of a new introduction aptly titled, "Home (new introduction)." Like the original, this introduction serves to contextualize the collection in the author's biography and, it being 43 years since original publication, its broader historical significance. As one might expect, Baraka writes with a more deliberate tone than he did in 1965 and situates the collection as an essential article of his

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Taylor and Samuel Delaney are also notable examples of black writers working in the midst of the overwhelmingly white New York bohemian scene.

<sup>2</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Home (original introduction)," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Akashic Books, 2009), 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 22.



budding Black Arts stage. Baraka mainly focuses his attention on a survey of important national matters that informed his perspective and the political imperatives of the essays. He recounts the ideological break by many, especially young, black people with civil rights principles of non-violent direction action, the impact of the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, and the influence of global anticolonial revolution. However, this backdrop does not contain enough personal detail to glean much biographical specificity and provides only a cursory overview of a familiar period of turbulence. In short, one doesn't really learn anything new about Baraka per se.

While the somewhat generic mood-setting historicization makes up the majority of the brief introduction Baraka opens with a more revealing personal reflection on homophobia in *Home*. Specifically, Baraka leads with an apology for his usage of "homophobic language."<sup>4</sup> This inclusion of such language in *Home* is both explicit and implicit, ranging from sexually shaming blunt epithets to descriptive feminization as evidence of political incapacity. Further, his semantics range from interracial categorization, most notoriously the assertion that "most white men are trained to be fags"<sup>5</sup> to intraracial slights such as citing James Baldwin and Peter Abrahams as having shrouded their "real" black manhood under "gay exotic plumage."<sup>6</sup> The apology is, however, expressly made towards his recurrent usage of the term "fag." Baraka regretfully describes his periodic usage of the term as "wrongheaded and unscientific."<sup>7</sup> He goes on to explain that he was "using the word 'fag' homeboy style to refer to the right leaning liberalism of too many Americans..."<sup>8</sup> Here Baraka situates his usage of the term outside of merely personal habit and into an established vocabulary of savvy urban black males, in which he includes himself. Certainly Baraka is alluding to the centrality of emasculation as primary means of playful homosocial mocking amongst male peers of many identities, and specifically within the black male oral tradition of playing the dozens. It is worth mentioning that I define homosociality to be fundamentally non-romantic male relationships latent with competitive anxiety for claim to masculine power and/or authority. As such, Baraka didn't invent the term "fag," its colloquial meaning or its discursive utility. Rather, he picked it up as a participant in a group that shared, in the words of scholar of black oral tradition Elijah Wald, "linguistic taxonomy" in which emasculation was a primary, nearly reflexive, means of banter.<sup>9</sup> Baraka goes on to clarify his, and presumably the larger community, meaning of the term as mobilized at the intersection of longstanding oral code and its historically particular political import:

In actuality, the attack was on a social class made comfortable from the super-profits bombed and machine-gunned out of the Third World (and it should be obvious that there has grown a whole sector of Negroes participating in this as well). The sexual reference comes from a ghetto language which used homosexuality as a metaphor for weakness...<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Home (new introduction)," *Home*, 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Amiri Baraka, "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," *Home*, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Amiri Baraka, "A Brief Reflection on Two Hot Shots," *Home*, 139.

<sup>7</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Home (new introduction)," *Home*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Elijah Wald, *Talking About Your 'Mama: The Dozens, Snaps and the Deep Roots of Rap* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Home (new introduction)," *Home*, 16.

Here the discursive figure of the “Fag”—generally white but potentially, and increasingly, black—is *made* or “trained” at a nexus of social decadence and violent economic excess resulting in failed embodied command. The figure of the fag rhetorically pivots on homosexuality as an inherently weakened trope to establish a more broadly applicable colloquial meaning to a myriad of non-sexual male failings.

Importantly, the fag as a primarily and foundationally white emasculated figure doubles in implication as a charge of racial heresy when attributed to a black male. For if, as Marlon Ross states of Baraka, “sexuality is a resource for racial identification”<sup>11</sup> then here epithetic sexual discourse is a specific means to challenge black identity. Baraka’s sexual defamation suggests racial dis-identification by approximation to white males, whom he suggests are the figures most subject to socialized emasculation. However, the intricacies of what “fag,” and many other analogous words, *actually* meant within Black Arts intraracial homosocial discourse is the concern of the chapters to come. In 2009, Baraka’s decision to re-stage *Home* with an apologetic explanation of homophobic language indicates how significant masculinity was to the emerging Black Arts Movement, and how notorious such rhetoric had become to its legacy. It suggests Baraka’s recognition that language of emasculation was crucial to the development of his Black Arts era thinking and, as such, how the Black Arts Movement has historically been evaluated.

Baraka’s deserving of pardon is certainly subjective. In my estimation, the trajectory of his life suggests sincerity. Baraka’s lifelong commitment to political and artistic causes was one of ideological alchemy and a great willingness to reflect and reform. From Beat, to Nationalist, to Marxist, Baraka’s philosophical basis shifted, often drastically, but was always set in a staying objective to fight for social justice. Baraka’s moving eulogy of James Baldwin, whom he had tagged as depleted by emasculation numerous times in the 1960s (as chapter 2 will discuss), is but one example of his willingness to amend previous assertions regarding sexuality in his formative BAM years. For my purposes, beyond his perceived earnestness is Baraka’s choice not only to apologize but also to explain what he *really meant* when using homophobic vernacular. Baraka’s use of “fag” as a potent defamation and his subsequent attempts to contextualize his vernacular as a particularly historical, racialized consciousness typifies a broader critical goal of this dissertation: to identify latent meanings and rhetorical networks of emasculation in canonical BAM literary discourse.

This project complicates and deepens black feminist and queer critiques that the Black Arts Movement (BAM) deployed misogyny and homophobia in the service of a masculinist vision of black liberation. Specifically, emphasizing the role of homosocial discourse in marshaling intraracial terms of black (in)authenticity. *Zealous Watchmen* proposes that key themes that mark Black Arts works—homophobic language, accusations of race treachery and of mimicry of purportedly white literary style, ambivalent observations of the “misguided masculinity” of black street hustlers—mutually constitute one another’s meaning around a common axis: the intent of the Black Arts authors not only to discipline but to emasculate other black men. I argue that bold proclamations regarding one’s status as a *real* black man were coupled with habitual accusations of failed black manhood articulated through a range of literary signifiers. I take the title of this dissertation from James Baldwin’s description of Eldridge Cleaver, whose homophobic attacks on Baldwin (detailed in chapter 1) surpass Baraka’s, as

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<sup>11</sup>Marlon Ross, “Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective,” *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 291.

“Zealous Watchman”<sup>12</sup> in an attempt to not refute but refocus Cleaver’s disparaging remarks of Baldwin as a race traitor due to his homosexuality. Baldwin’s statement provides a useful way of thinking about the boundary-marking stakes of intraracial homosociality in the Black Arts Movement.

Taking on the Black Arts’ most bombastic assertions of masculinity, as well as some of its more subtle rhetorical formulations, my analysis of textual discourse takes seriously the colloquial plea of “that’s not what I mean by that word(s),” probing it further, then, to ask what they *did* mean. Why use *that word*, towards such an end? What other words did BAM writers use to a comparable end? From what referential framework does this network of words and refrains draw? *Zealous Watchmen* seeks to define and interrogate terms taken up by key Black Power/Black Arts intellectuals meant to signify black male failure. I do so in the interest of teasing out how seemingly disparate terms of disparagement intersect in their intent to define and police the boundaries of black masculine authenticity. In each chapter I orient my close reading of a canonical BAM text through one of the following key themes: *homophobia*, *race traitorousness*, *authorial angst*, and ostensive *misguided masculinity* and show them to be wedded in a mutually constitutive semiotic discourse. I to argue that these distinct rhetorical signs share a common referent and goal: black emasculation. My study complicates how what can be read as distinct rhetorical challenges to authentic blackness and masculinity, should be understood as co-constitutive. I will argue this concentricity resulted in emasculative claims doubling as claims of racial failure and vice versa.

My approach centers on the elastic nature of rhetoric, opening a new direction for considerations of masculine anxiety as the thematic hub from which other articulations of Black Arts tensions draw their meaning. *Zealous Watchmen* contributes interpretations of BAM themes of gender and sexuality as critical ideological conduits and rhetorical vocabularies of racial identity. I adopt a method that pivots on rhetoric, cultural studies, and queer theory as partnering tools of literary theorization to show that Black Arts literature produced a semiotic network of emasculating signifiers in service of arbitrating black male authenticity.

The centrality of intraracial emasculation is explicated through close readings of Black Arts texts across literary mediums, including: essays in Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* and James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street*, Amiri Baraka’s play *The Dutchman*, poetry from movement anthology *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, and the black pulp fiction novels of Donald Goines. Through both canonical and less considered texts I reveal the centrality of intraracial masculine tension as principle trope of Black Arts Movement literary articulations of black authenticity.

### **A Note on Some Dicey Terms**

Those looking for a singular definition of “Black Power” or “Black Arts,” will likely be disappointed. Attempts to siphon complex cultural movements into neat definitional packages are rarely satisfactory in their absoluteness. However, the Black Power era, which spans roughly 1966-1978, and the explosion of cultural production of the Black Arts Movement within this era, is a particularly dicey historical entity in this respect. Yet any serviceable definition of the Black Arts Movement requires centering its relationship to the Black Power era and Nationalist politics.

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<sup>12</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 459.

Black Nationalism is a distinct type of Nationalism; a geographically unmoored nationalism without a nation-state. In the absence of traditional nation state institutions of governance, the realm of culture, in the words of cultural theorists Wahneema Lubiano, came to “stand in for the state” as the generative hub of collective ethos and boundary making.<sup>13</sup> In the Black Power era, writers were principal intellectual pundits in defining and regulating the terms of blackness’s meaning and the intimate relationship between, in Algernon Austin’s terminology, “achieving” blackness and “achieving” manhood.<sup>14</sup> Black Arts Movement theoreticians and artists produced the proverbial writing on the walls of racial boundaries of identity politics. The largely self-appointed role of the Black Arts writer was to both define and exemplify the burgeoning terms of harnessing blackness. The line between art and propaganda was intentionally blurred, as literature and political activism were understood as co-constituents in a common effort to promote a Black Nationalist consciousness. Cultural expression, with writing as a primary and lasting manifestation, served as a type of social legislation meant to govern the parameters of black citizenship.

As Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford state, “During the Black Arts Movement, the inseparability of the ideological and the aesthetic was considered intuitive and self-evident.”<sup>15</sup> With this in mind, Black Arts can be understood as the nationally sprawling paradigm by which artists who were committed to black self-determination, in its many potential iterations, aesthetically articulated black cultural identity. The style of Black Power, its advocacy and modes of Black Arts representation, were quite often rooted in unwavering proclamations; that is to say, proponents *claimed* categorical definitions of their meanings of Black Power. However, the reality of the time period reflects numerous and conflicting meanings of both “black,” “power,” and, certainly, “Black Power,” which resulted in debate and divergence both by its proponents and those who study them.

The blackness of “Black Arts” and the prospective “power” it held had a remarkably malleable quality that fostered an irreconcilable contestation of its “true” meaning. Like Aime Cesaire said of Negritude, one of Black Power/Black Arts ideological ancestors, “Everyone had their own negritude”;<sup>16</sup> everyone could have their own version of Black Power. Black Power was at once always right and always wrong; its lack of official singular definition functioned to ensure that the term meant what one needed it to mean. This, of course, also meant that it may, and often did, contradict the meaning of others who claimed the term. Carmen Phelps has noted the nature of generative internal discord: “the concept of collaboration both in practice and in vision motivated a culture of intense debate between Black Artists and their critics.”<sup>17</sup> In this respect James Smethurst has noted that distinctions between Black Arts writers were generally a

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<sup>13</sup> Wahneema Lubiano, “Standing In for the State: Black Nationalism and “Writing” the Black Subject,” *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, Eds. Eddie S. Glaude Jr, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 156-165.

<sup>14</sup> See Algernon Austin *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006.)

<sup>15</sup> “Introduction,” *New Thoughts on the Black Power Movement*, eds. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, (New York; Monthly Review Press, 2000), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Carmen L. Phelps, *Visionary Women Writers of Chicago’s Black Arts Movement*, (University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 3.

“matter of emphasis” in political or social focus more so than fundamental differences in belief.<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, the Black Power/Black Arts era may make for a less than tidy encyclopedia definition. However, its complicated meanings make for fertile ground for inter-disciplinary scholarship and numerous potential emphases. In this respect, multiple valences and scholarly methodologies do not undercut the movement’s power or cloud its achievements, rather they grant the movement its rightful complexity and expand its reaching. Thus, this is not an effort to put forth a comprehensive statement on what the Black Arts Movement “truly” was. In fact, to do so would be to betray a fundamental understanding of the period’s nuances. To overstate meaning would be disloyal to the varying meanings that combined to shape the era as a whole. Rather, my objective is to focus on a key ideological strand, to pull to center a specific “matter of emphasis.” That key strand, as has been noted, is the role of intraracial homosocial discourse.

Of course, expressions of masculine anxiety and phallogentrism are not the sole property of the Black Arts Movement nor are they the movement’s sole theme. Indeed, few things are more germane to western history than masculine angst, particularly white masculine angst, and its innumerable fallouts. The hallmark of white masculinity is a fragility that underlies performances of brash authority, and a primary index of such dimly veiled angst has been the projection of fears and desires on black bodies as corporeal reservoir of repressed psychic anguish. White masculine angst transmutes into material black vulnerability, and black suffering ensures white male social patriarchy. I mention this because in the purview of the long historical shadow of black male pathologizing there can be cautiousness, even defensiveness, in Black Arts Movement scholarship to critically address masculinity. Indeed, as Lionel Smith has said BAM seems to evoke an antagonistic “for or against” binary amongst scholars; I contend that questions of masculinity tend to exacerbate this broader tendency. I have no intent to engage BAM in the context of these dueling political conditions, but rather a consideration of a critical theme towards a more nuanced understanding of canonical texts.

My analysis is based on the contributions of texts that, while not representative of all participants of the movement by any means, greatly informed and shaped the ideological parameters of the Black Arts era. This is to say one did not have to subscribe to masculinist sensibilities to be implicated in their effects. Even those who did not embrace these ideas, or rejected them, were subject to their prevalence within the movement at large. As mentioned the Black Power era was full of declarative rhetoric and masculinists were, as is generally true, the brashest. Tropes of authoritative masculinity were omnipresent, whether candidly embraced or avidly rejected. For instance, in what may be the most dedicated consideration of BAM masculinity, Rolland Murray explores conceptions of masculinity in novels that specifically resisted the dominant phallogentrism of the period in *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power and Masculine Ideology*. Further, Cheryl Clarke considers how black women wrote in, through and against masculinist restrictions in *After Mecca: The Women of the Black Arts Movement*. As such my dissertation does not seek to survey *all* literary iterations of Black Power/Black Arts masculinism. Rather, as the chapter breakdown illustrates I have chosen a set of key influential canonical works of Black Arts that serve as sites of analysis from which to explicate the dynamics of black masculinist discourse. My approach of emphasizing literary mediums to generate critical theorization of the complexities of black masculinity takes its

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<sup>18</sup> James Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 171.

critical and methodological cues from the strategies of, what cultural theorist Maurice Wallace has called, “Black Masculinity Studies.”<sup>19</sup>

*The Quest for Black Authenticity and Black Masculinity Studies Interventions*

Embedded in Paul Gilroy’s study of diasporic routes of black cultural exchange, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, he extends Stuart Hall’s famous formulation that, “race is the modality by which class is lived,” stating that then, “gender is the modality by which race is lived.”<sup>20</sup> Made almost in passing, this intriguing statement receives limited development. In place of theoretical explication, Gilroy employs his formulation to analyze the relationship between transnational circuits of black music and racial authenticity. In doing so Gilroy gestures to the role of masculinity as an anchoring centerpiece in cultural exportations of “racial sameness through particular definitions of gender and sexuality.”<sup>21</sup> Further, black *authenticity*, that affective barometer that invested arbitrators utilize to qualify degrees of cultural virtue across presumed ontological sameness, is measured largely by a circumscribed conception of hyperbolic heterosexual manhood. While Gilroy’s chapter acknowledges masculinity as a pliable intersectional identity, on the whole *The Black Atlantic* charts the circulation of blackness through the lives of men more so than the modality of masculinity.

*Zealous Watchmen* pivots on Gilroy’s insight to argue that during the Black Arts era, gender, particularly masculinity, was the mode by which racial authenticity was discursively governed. To be sure, there is a fine distinction between projects about men, and projects about masculinity, and it is that difference that makes *all* the difference. Embracing the full implications of Gilroy’s statement, this dissertation echoes literary theorist of black masculinity Jeremy Leek in that, “I do not take masculinity for granted;”<sup>22</sup> a particularly necessary analytical position to assume as, despite naturalist rhetoric, neither did many Black Arts thinkers. I work from the foundational claim that masculinity is *never* an established fact, but rather a continuous process of socially discursive (un)becomings. Following Michel Kimmel, Maurice Wallace, and others, masculinity is a “vexed term,”<sup>23</sup> it is not static nor, while corporeally expressed in many ways, biological or restricted to the male bodied. Masculinity is socially constructed upon a fickle node of ceaseless anxiety and assurance as metric of gender (in)capacity. In the words of Michael Awkward, Masculinity Studies problematizes the “unproblematized perceptions of monolithic and normative maleness.”<sup>24</sup> In the case of *Black Masculinity Studies*, this entails a particular historical (em)masculinization process by which racialization has been constructed

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<sup>19</sup> Maurice Wallace. *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*. (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 2002,) 5.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993,) 85.

<sup>21</sup> Gilroy, 85.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey B. Leak, *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature*. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Maurice Berger, Brian Walls and Simon Watson, “Introduction,” *Constructing Masculinity*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Awkward *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 44.

through social myths of biological or pathological gendered non-normativity. In Darieck Scott's terming "blackening" doubles down on the troubled nature of masculinity as a sign of masculine excess and incapacity. As 'Black' is a shifting signifier, Black Masculinity Studies, in particular, centers masculinity to think of blackness as a constant state of (un)becoming.

My project is particularly indebted to the contributions of scholars of black masculinity, Philip Brian Harper, Darieck Scott, Maurice Wallace, Marlon Ross and Robert Reid-Pharr. However, their contributions and Black Masculinity Studies as a whole are deeply indebted to the critical interventions and theoretical paradigms of Black feminist thinkers. Indeed, black feminist theorists, many of whom were participants in the Black Power/Black Arts era, contributed the original and foundational critical consideration of patriarchy in Black Power iterations of Black Nationalism. Feminist thinkers such as Michelle Wallace, E. Francis White, bell hooks, Barbra Smith, Toni Cade Bambara, Francis Beale, those of the Combahee River Collective, as well as the works of black women authors such as Alice Walker and Gail Jones explicated how Black Nationalism, not without irony, tended to mimic aspects of white Eurocentric models of assumed political and social patriarchy as essential and natural to national order. Black feminist responses to the ascribed limits of gender, both socio-politically and interpersonally, opened up the prospect to consider how expectations of masculinity may have been restrictive for some men. In essence, black feminist critique of the masculine nature of the movement opened up the possibility to consider the presumed nature of masculinity *in* the movement.

While the authenticity of racial identity was the ultimate issue in the Black Arts literature I consider, it was a discourse of masculinity that mediated and made legible compliance or disobedience to *real* blackness. During the Black Arts period, in the words of Robert Reid-Pharr, "The Negro was becoming black," a process of psychological and intracommunal transition consisting of exorcisms of imposed self-perceptions and embracement of estranged essentialisms.<sup>25</sup> Following Reid-Pharr's guided distinction, "Negro" unbecoming, the conscious rejection of white acculturations, was the necessary rite of passage endured (to varying extent) en route to self-actualized black becoming. Implicit in Reid-Pharr's quote is that not all "Negroes" had, or necessarily ever would, become "black." In the framework of Reid-Pharr *Negro* and *male* are each advised terms (as they are throughout this dissertation) that signify states of racial and gendered lack in relationship to the fully realized character of *black* and *man*. Further, in Reid-Pharr's formulation the figure of the Negro is characterized as intraracial proxy to whiteness (a point that will be greatly elaborated on in chapters 1 and 2). As such "he" functions as internal boundary of racial failure, intimate warning of potential remission *and* steadying counter-point that confirms relative authenticity. E. Patrick Johnson points out that authenticity is fundamentally relational and determined by an antagonistic bond to the fashioned inauthentic. As such, the assumption of stability is the ironic ruse that covers the necessarily unstable nature of authenticity. Certainly, in the Black Arts context interracial antagonism served to orient black distinction, yet it was intraracial conflict that was the discursive landscape of defining racial authenticity. In the vein of the observations of Henry Louis Gates, authentic blackness and its Negro negation often found their terms of articulation in the "shifting sands of sexuality."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire and the Black American Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 131.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Louis Gates. *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora*, (New York: Basic Books, 2010,) 58.

Perhaps no one has engaged the tense relationship of race and manhood as the chief discursive site of debates regarding black authenticity as lucidly as Philip Brian Harper in *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and The Problem of African American Identity*. Harper troubles standing presumptions that BAM was invested in the comprehensive racial solidarity associated with Black Nationalism. He argues that BAM's nationalist ambitions were stymied, even unknowingly self-sabotaged, by orienting investments in critical claims to racial authenticity. Harper states that, "the response of black arts nationalism to social divisions within the black populace is not to strive to overcome it, but rather repeatedly to articulate it in the name of black consciousness."<sup>27</sup> Within this cyclic discourse Harper notes that "black consciousness" is named through claims to masculine tropes of corporeal strength, unwavering valor and sexual virility. Further, such masculine virtues are padded by a capacity to identify and rebuke failed racial consciousness, a failure recognizable and nameable through emasculation. Harper discloses a chronically fractured racial fraternity; an intraracial homosocial fissure that subtends claims to rightful nationalist membership.

Eve Sedgwick's seminal study of homosociality, *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, suggests that in any fraternal order the line between the homosocial and the homoerotic is thin. For Sedgwick women are the primary conduits of homosocial relationship—the embodied channel that transmutes the potentially precarious dimensions of male rapport into "appropriate" rivaling terms of sexual conquest. Further, Sedgwick's model suggests that the lean fault-line is compulsively monitored and regulated to avoid the dangerous prospective slippage from homosocial collective into the gendered chaos of the homoerotic. On this point, and in the context of BAM, Reid-Pharr, in his essay "Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity" articulates the discursive management of this tense homosocial dynamic. Reid-Pharr indicates that the emasculated are discarded into a type of "no man's land"<sup>28</sup> in which their sexualized, gendered, and racialized inadequacy produce them not as *non-black* but as *failed black*, a distinction that does not allow them full entry into whiteness but rather a terminal racial outcast status. The interventions of Harper and Reid-Pharr, in the purview of Sedgwick, suggest that a sect of failed males remains always present in their exclusion; as such, failure is needed to define the terms of racial and sexual achievement of the included. Moreover, this type of always-present exclusion keeps the included distinguishable to the self and the group. Therefore, excommunication does not render the "failed male" out of sight but rather *always* in sight, proving an anxious assurance for the excommunicator.

It is on this point that more work is necessary. Scholarship has, by and large, taken terms of Black Arts/Black Power homosocial denigration, inter and intraracial, as literal descriptions that signal varying distinct qualifications of expulsion from the authentic black masculine status. Scholars invested in critical evaluations of the period have largely taken notions of anti-whiteness, homophobia, racial traitorousness, and emasculation at their word. These terms have been considered to be collaborators, conjoined in the effort to produce boundaries of black male failure; as separate disavowals linked a common authorial intent to produce characters of threat.

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<sup>27</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996,) 44.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, "Tearing at the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of a Late Twentieth Century Black Masculinity," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 610.



These conclusions have been vital and foundational to literary theorizations of the Black Arts period. However, there is still a need to fully, and pointedly, investigate how these terms are entangled in a web of semiotic relationships. A significant exception to the predominant approach is Marlon Ross's essay "Camping the Dirty Dozens" in which he persuasively suggests that for Amiri Baraka the term "faggot" existed at the intersection of two seemingly bifurcated sets of cultural lexicon: that of the primarily white queer "camp" discourse of the bohemian Beat scene and that of the urban black male rhetorical practice of the "dozens."<sup>29</sup> Ross's article gestures toward how surface readings of Black Arts language may fail to comprehend a host of potential vernacular specificities and overlook intended rhetorical meaning. Specifically, what has been overlooked is how discernable signifiers of black male failure are constructed through the importation, and subsequent re-articulation, of other terms of black masculine failure. It is on this point that I believe my intervention becomes necessary.

This project may appear to be invested in a seemingly interminable unraveling of semantic coils and cyclical logic. Particularly as the BAM/Black Power authors considered were not always consistent in their formulations. In the words of Black Power literary scholar Roland Murray, conceptions of black manhood were often rather "clumsy."<sup>30</sup> However, it is this very clumsiness, the convoluted nature of denigrating terms of failed blackness and manhood, which is a key element of my study. I wish to wade in this confusion at what I perceive to be sites of concentricity of rhetorical black male othering done in the service of producing a stabilized black masculine subject. It is my position that seemingly discernable differences in rhetorical exclusion cannot ever be *fully* unraveled. Rather these rhetorical signs are linked in a web of semiotic references in which each inhabits meaning based on the always implicit, and often times explicit, importation of their cohort accomplices. Again, *Zealous Watchmen* proposes that reoccurring themes of homophobia, race traitorousness, mimicry of supposedly white literary aestheticism and misguided masculinity mutually constitute one another's meaning around a common axis: the intent of the Black Arts authors to discipline and emasculate other black men. I argue that bold proclamations regarding one's status as a *real* black man were coupled with habitual accusations of failed black manhood articulated through a range of literary signifiers.

The innate engagement of literature, politics, and identity within the Black Arts Movement is ideal for, and necessitates, interdisciplinary scholarship. Thus, this dissertation will be a fundamentally interdisciplinary project in which I utilize African American Literary Theory, Black Cultural Studies, and African American Cultural History as cooperative modes of qualitative analysis. As noted, my central sites of analysis will be literary productions of the Black Power/Black Arts. The qualitative method of close readings of primary literary texts is my approach to producing original critical theorization. Moreover, the implications of my close readings and literary theorization will be informed by the Cultural Studies conception that cultural artifacts can be considered as not merely isolated objects but as both reflections of and

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<sup>29</sup> Ross, "Camping the Dirty Dozens." Also, it is notable that in the re-issue of Baraka's collection of essays *Home: Social Essays* Baraka states in the foreword, written in 2009, that he used the term "faggot", "homeboy style". While Baraka does not cite the dozens specifically this phrasing implies the signifying quality of his usage of the term. However, as mentioned he also states that this does not excuse his use of the term, which he deems to have been "wrongheaded and unscientific," 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Roland Murray, *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power and Masculine Ideology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 40.

producers of broader notions of cultural meaning. This relationship between literature and its cultural meaning will be grounded in an historical context that emphasizes the conscious relationship of aesthetics and politics of the Black Power era. In the following chapters I chart intraracial masculine tension as a principal theme and rhetorical reference from the canonic works of BAM's genesis through its precarious impact on black pulp fiction in its waning years.

### Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 considers Eldridge Cleaver's notorious attacks on James Baldwin in his polemical collection *Soul on Ice*. More pointedly, the chapter focuses on Baldwin's curious usage of homophobic idioms in reply to Cleaver in the extended essay *No Name in the Street*. Through a close reading of both texts I query what can be learned about Black Arts era homophobia when a gay black man wields homophobic rhetoric. Through this question I consider the relationships between: homophobic language, the recurrent figure of the 'black faggot,' and the "whitening" of male homosexuality. I argue that in *No Name* Baldwin adapts homophobic epithets to signify a myriad of black masculine failures associated with homosexuality established in *Soul on Ice*. For Baldwin, unlike Cleaver who was avowedly homophobic, homophobic rhetoric will be shown as an ideological foothold leveraged as a lexemic channel to communicate masculine failure. Moreover, and greatly in the interest of his own personal defense, Baldwin's utilization of such language and its buttressing ideology made a specifically racially and gendered distinction between black gay men and, in Baldwin's words, "faggots, punks and sissies" who were "unutterably debased males."<sup>31</sup> Baldwin's peculiar usage of homophobic *language* suggests the deployment of something that hinges upon, and is always in proximity to, anti-gayness, yet intends to function as a distinguishable and malleable sign of intraracial masculine abjection. Ultimately, it is Baldwin's rhetoric, built from Cleaver's logic, which signals the pervasive colloquial meaning of homophobic epithet amongst BAM writers.

Chapter 2 looks to Amiri Baraka's definitive play *Dutchman* to think through the sexual dimensions of the Black Arts figure of racial traitorousness, "Uncle Tom." I consider the drama's protagonist Clay, BAM Uncle Tom par excellence, as a composite archetype formulated at the symbiotic intersection of the following Black Arts tropes: the racially deluded black faggot, the emasculated decadent white male, and the white female as embodied conduit to white patriarchy. I argue that Clay's desire for interracial sex, a desire induced by the play's insidious temptress Lula, paradoxically signals a tempting inauguration into the supposed faggotry of white middle class maleness. As noted, Baraka regularly utilized the term "faggot" to explain white maleness as caught within an undertow of its own emasculative social structures. It will be shown that the Uncle Tom figure, emblemized in Clay, threatens to *become* a "faggot" in his attempt to personify an assumed normative maleness (the domain of whiteness) through interracial heterosexual sex. Yet, reading against pervasive scholarly conclusions, I argue that ultimately Clay is murdered for his critical choice to abandon the liaison with Lula, a white woman. Clay's choice signals a refusal to be the serviceable figure of sexually criminal black man that Lula seeks to compel and white maleness is dependent upon.

Chapter 3 reads across the lasting anthology *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro American Writing* to consider how the act of writing threatened to disconnect the BAM author from the central authoritative power of manhood, the body. This chapter explores articulations of black male authors' anxious relationship to the, per BAM's theorization, whitened and emasculated

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<sup>31</sup> Murray, *Our Living*, 459.

status of western authorship. I argue that around the topic of literature and the role and status of the black male author/intellectual this habitual emasculation and intraracial outcasting is inverted and manifests as *self*-contempt, or at least as angst. The racial binary of black corporeal action and abstracted white literature presented a conspicuous puzzle for Black Arts authors. Cultural intellectuals who exercised criticality through literature and theory were forced to reckon with the shortcomings of their craft in relation to embodied action as a foundational determinate of black authenticity. I center instances in which *Black Fire* contributors promoted and claimed to embody the aforementioned standards of masculinism through a medium that innately challenged their capacity to legitimately claim such stake. This paradox makes for an unremitting site of authorial double downing; a cyclical discourse of assertion and disavowal for the author who staged himself in the crosshairs of embodied action-oriented blackness and disembodied inactive failed blackness.

Chapter 4 steps beyond the paragons of BAM to explore the silence of Black Arts writers toward 1970s black pulp fiction, specifically the Black Experience novels of Donald Goines. I shift my analytical focus from the outspoken admonishment of black fags, Uncle Toms, and whitened authors, to consider the significance of *virtual silence* directed toward Goines and the literary genre he exemplified. The exclusion of Goines, an author who wrote about and to urban black folk men, presents an aberrant case study in my broader scholarship on Black Arts intraracial homosociality. I ask: how might Goines' work disturb BAM's expectations of revolutionary black manhood? And what can be learned about the restrictions of authenticated Black Arts masculinity by virtue of such disturbance? I speculatively theorize how Goines employed black masculinity in a manner that challenged Black Arts cultural politics of folk masculinity. Specifically, I focus on how Goines' novels featured depictions of ephemeral masculine agency in the context of unrelenting black grief, grief that even shapes pleasure and agency, as incongruent with the BAM political project of masculine transformative insurgence.

## Chapter 1

### Meeting at the Watch Tower: James Baldwin's *No Name in the Street* and the Re-Sexing of Homophobic Vernacular

#### A Wolf in Goat's Clothing: Eldridge Cleaver, James Baldwin and Analytical Oversights

"Rape was an insurrectionary Act."<sup>1</sup> In what is perhaps the most notorious proclamation of the highly contentious rhetorical era of the late 1960s, Eldridge Cleaver, Black Power ideologue provocateur, claimed that his serial raping of white females was in fact an effort toward racial liberation. Cleaver alleged that this violent sexual crime was a misguided revolutionary tactic of assault on the white male power structure at its most cherished and vulnerable site: *the*, as opposed to *a*, white female body. Following the guiding paradigm of Eve Sedgwick, while heterosexual in nature the peculiarity of Cleaver's conception is that it seeks to utilize the white female as a medium by which to engage in interracial homosocial conflict.<sup>2</sup> The act was one of intentional criminality (in the sense that Cleaver advisedly terms his "act" as "rape"; the knowingly criminal aspect of the "act" informing its insurgent nature) conceived as a revolutionary action by a black *man* against white *males*.

Cleaver's bombastic claims regarding rape and interracial homosociality were subtended by equally provocative claims regarding black male homosexuality as evidential of interracial homosocial obedience. Within his polemical prison-time memoir *Soul On Ice*, in an essay titled "Notes on a Native Son," Cleaver attacked the racial authenticity and manhood of perhaps the most acclaimed and accomplished African American author of the previous decade, James Baldwin. However, Cleaver's critical aim was the personal sexual practices and corresponding racial psychology of Baldwin, not his prose.<sup>3</sup> Baldwin's literature, mainly his third novel *Another Country*, functioned as substantiating data for Cleaver's psychoanalytical claims. Specifically, it was the interracial homosexual experiences and eventual suicide of Rufus in *Another Country* that Cleaver cited as a fictionalized confession of Baldwin's own tangled sexual and racial crisis. Cleaver asserted that Baldwin's homosexuality was, in essence, the manifestation of a "racial death wish."<sup>4</sup> He argued that Baldwin's sexuality was a concession of his black manhood and signaled his engagement in an unachievable attempt to "become a white man in a black body."<sup>5</sup> For Cleaver, the connections were clear; black manhood, which he himself exemplarily embodied, was constituted by a virile racialized heterosexuality that carried the capacity to challenge systems of white male racism heaped upon black men. Conversely, black male homosexuality was a renouncement of both blackness and manhood and signified consent to racial and sexual domination; a condition of sexualized racial submission, which Baldwin elucidated.

<sup>1</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), 26

<sup>2</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> While Cleaver does discuss, and even commend, Baldwin's literary work his analysis of Baldwin's prose is used as medium by which to consider the intersection of race and sexuality that Cleaver believes is brought to life in Baldwin's personal actions. In other the words, Baldwin's texts are merely a way to think about Baldwin himself, for Cleaver.

<sup>4</sup> Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 101.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Eldridge Cleaver's attack on James Baldwin is the most infamous and frequently cited example of homophobia within Black Nationalist politics of The Black Power era. "Notes on a Native Son" has emerged as ground zero terrain for considerations of black gay men as, to borrow from Robert Reid-Pharr, intraracial abjected "scapegoat(s)"; those sacrificed in efforts to stabilize heterosexual black masculine subjectivity and prospective Nationalist collectivity.<sup>6</sup> Along this reasoning, Baldwin served as the iconic embodiment of an internal racial boundary that at once threatened and fortified the union of heterosexuality with authentic black masculinity. Marlon Ross has suggested that the consistent centering of Cleaver's homophobic lambasting of Baldwin has over-determined the perception of Black Power as unequivocally coupled with candid homophobic masculine posturing.<sup>7</sup> I agree with Ross that Cleaver's position on homosexuality in "Notes on a Native Son," and importantly his usage of Baldwin to illustrate his position, has significantly saturated scholarly consideration of the relationship between masculinity and Black Power ethos (the most notable instances of this scholarship will receive concerted review in the second section of this chapter). A significant consequence of Ross's proposition is that Baldwin has been repeatedly victimized through consistent reproductions of the terms of Cleaver's discourse. In this respect, by critically evaluating Cleaver's position Baldwin's subjectivity is ironically and repeatedly usurped by those very sexualized terms of discourse that are being interrogated.

In the context of Ross's argument he suggests that centering Huey Newton's speech "On Women's and Gay Liberation Movement" would make for a vastly different narrative of Black Power, masculinity and sexuality. In matters of gender and sexual progressiveness, Newton rightfully stands as Cleaver's epochal opposite. Much of Newton's evolution and public disavowal of homophobia and sexism is credited to the influence of James Baldwin as well as Jean Genet. However, it is notable that Huey Newton's 1973 essay, "Eldridge Cleaver, He is No James Baldwin," can be read as the pioneer work in the now-familiar positioning of Baldwin as victim to interrogate Cleaver's homophobia, sexism and to question his sexuality. Newton's essay, while in fact quite deft in much of its psychoanalytic reading of *Soul on Ice*, largely functions as a curious piece of popular archival gossip. The most widely mentioned, but rarely closely considered, element of the essay is Newton's claim that in 1967, shortly after the publication of *Soul On Ice*, he saw Baldwin and Cleaver share an erotic kiss. If the story is true or if it reveals Cleaver's "true" sexual identity is beside my point here. Newton's story is noteworthy because he uses Baldwin, whose privacy is assumedly a non-concern as he is, in Newton's words, an "admitted homosexual,"<sup>8</sup> as corporeal evidence of Cleaver's mindset and suppressed identity. Newton suggests that Baldwin kisses Cleaver to "expose"<sup>9</sup> Cleaver. Of the kiss Newton concludes, "Baldwin, who had neither written or uttered a response to Cleaver's acid literary criticism, had finally spoken."<sup>10</sup> Newton interrupts the embrace as a form "non-

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, "Tearing at the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of a Late Twentieth Century Black Masculinity," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Marlon Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and Racial Identities of Sexuality," in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 48n16.

<sup>8</sup> Huey Newton, "Eldridge Cleaver, He is No James Baldwin," in *The Huey Newton Reader*, eds. David Hillard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002, original 1973) 287.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 287.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 287.

verbal communication” meant to “dramatically expose(d)” Cleaver. Here Newton suggests that Baldwin’s sexuality be understood as his chosen method of disclosing and articulating Cleaver’s repressed sexuality. Moreover, Baldwin’s erotic action stands in the place of writing or speaking as a means of critical communication; Baldwin, Newton assumes, is speaking with his body and thus Newton is simply, via language, relating Baldwin’s point. Yet, following this logic, to whom is Baldwin exposing Cleaver? Perhaps himself, but by virtue of his limited public discussion of Cleaver, Baldwin was not intending to “expose” him to a mass audience. Conversely, it is Newton’s story, and Baldwin’s sexuality, namely his erotic action, that serve to communicate Newton’s critique and “exposure” of Cleaver. While, Newton’s essay raises a number of questions regarding the intraparty split of the Panthers and the personal posturing of both Cleaver and Newton that are beyond the scope of this essay Newton’s story initiates a long trajectory of how Baldwin is positioned in the scholarly consideration of *Soul on Ice*.

Cleaver’s villainy is legible through Baldwin’s victimhood. Baldwin has become, to appropriate Reid-Pharr’s phrasing, *the* incurably defenseless sacrificial lamb whose personal complexities are forfeited in the crosshairs of explanatory condemnations of Cleaver and the ideological current of Black Power homophobia he represents. In a sense, Baldwin is rendered *only* scapegoat, *only* victim, *only* gay, as the gay victim is his necessary role in considerations of the implications of Cleaver’s formative intraracial homophobia. In this respect, one objective of this chapter, or perhaps rather a collateral effect of my discourse analysis, is to reconsider and unseat the seemingly inveterate gay victim status Baldwin has obtained in his inclusion of considerations of Cleaver and the Black Power era.

One major consequence of this reoccurring dynamic is the incomplete interrogation of Baldwin’s curious literary response to Cleaver. Yes, Cleaver and *many* others victimized Baldwin in this period. However, Baldwin was not passively victimized. Although perhaps not as one might expect or hope, he did directly address *Soul On Ice* and its polarizing author. Baldwin included a belated and brief response to Cleaver in his 1972 extended essay *No Name in the Street*, published nearly four years after the publication of *Soul On Ice*. However, in the context of the African American Studies canon *No Name* has not inspired equal scholarly attention or the landmark, be it notorious, status conferred on *Soul On Ice*. As Bill Lynes has stated, *No Name* is perhaps Baldwin’s “most reviled and neglected works.”<sup>11</sup> The attention the essay does receive, which is comparatively less than the rest of Baldwin’s canon, primarily invests in tracing the trajectory of Baldwin’s personal and political biography. As will be discussed further in pages to come, *No Name* is most often considered, for better, but usually for worse, as a landmark by which to identify Baldwin’s waning hope for national redemption and his adoption of key Black Power tropes. For my purposes, the relative lack of concerted consideration of Baldwin’s response to Cleaver in *No Name* has resulted in a dearth of sustained attention to the implications

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Lynes, “God’s Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin and Black Radicalism” *Science & Society* 74.1: 28.

of Baldwin's usage of homophobic rhetoric in his addressing of "Notes on a Native Son," in conjunction with his commentary on Cleaver personally.<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter I will explore how the themes of racial male failure associated with homosexuality set forth in "Notes on a Native Son" are, perhaps counter-intuitively, reified by James Baldwin in his defensive response to Cleaver in *No Name in the Street*. I will situate *No Name* in the context of the Black Power/Black Arts Movement as an essay deeply influenced by and reflective of ideologies and aesthetics of Black Arts/Black Power. I will consider how Baldwin's response to Cleaver operates as a personal defense against charges that his homosexuality is a sign of racial traitorousness. More importantly, I focus on how Baldwin's defense is curiously steeped in a corroboration of the logic in which Cleaver's charges are grounded. In my close reading of *No Name in the Street* it will be shown that Baldwin reifies the soundness of Cleaver's trepidations by embracing homophobic discourse to articulate his disavowal of compromised males as prospective conspirators aiding white systems of black repression. A consequence of this personal defense is that it validates the legitimacy of Cleaver's concerns regarding black emasculation yet designates them misdiagnosed when applied to himself and, subsequently, misdiagnosed when applied to gay black men categorically. In this respect Baldwin only *partially* confirms Cleaver's homophobia as he nuances Cleaver's logic into a more complex question of the relationship between emasculating language, gayness, and blackness as they pertain to conceptions of an authentic black manhood. Specifically, it is Baldwin's usage of homophobic nouns "faggots, punks and sissies" to vilify "debased men" as racial traitors<sup>13</sup> that ironically produces a buffered space between black homosexuality and black faggotry to allow black homosexuality access to Black Nationalist tropes of black masculine authenticity.

What can be learned about the content of Black Power era homophobia when homophobic rhetoric is wielded by a gay black man? To address this query I build on Marlon Ross's formative intervention in the essay "Baldwin's Sissy Heroics" that "the sissy must be as

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest that no one has discussed Baldwin's reply to Cleaver in *No Name*. Indeed, in what has been tabbed a "Baldwin renaissance" that began in the mid 1990's the entirety of his life and sprawling canon are receiving increasingly detailed attention amongst Baldwin scholars. However, Baldwin's response to Cleaver, and the centrality of homophobic epithets and their semiotic tie to the Black Arts lexicon, is seldom the critical site of analysis. Some scholars who have dedicated space to Baldwin's response and its relationship to themes of masculinity include Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso Books, 1978), Magdalena Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) and, briefly but deftly, Rolland Murray *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power and Masculine Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) 31-32. Indeed, Murray does not spend a great deal of time on the Baldwin's response but rather mentions it reference to the broader objective of considering his relationship to Black Power. Yet his brief statement that Baldwin is "Affirming the abject status of the sexual invert yet locating himself outside it," and thus "Baldwin legitimated Cleaver's sexual logic" (30), concisely gestures at the objective of my more sustained consideration of Baldwin's response.

<sup>13</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 459.

theoretically distinguished from the homosexual.”<sup>14</sup> I extend Ross’s critical intervention to explore how Baldwin, more so than Cleaver, who points to the critical nuances of homophobic rhetoric operating within the Black Power/Black Arts era discourses of black masculine authenticity and its dependency upon black masculine failure. Baldwin’s usage of homophobic language provides an analytical terrain that Cleaver’s does not. For Baldwin, unlike Cleaver who was avowedly homophobic, homophobic rhetoric is not necessarily referential to gayness but instead serves as an ideological foothold leveraged as a lexemic channel to communicate masculine failure. Moreover, and greatly in the interest of his own personal defense, Baldwin’s utilization of such language and its buttressing ideology made a specifically racially and gendered distinction between black gay men and “unutterably debased males,” those Baldwin variously referred to as “faggots, punks and sissies.”<sup>15</sup> The distinction between the two allowed for gayness and black masculinity to achieve a tenable union that Cleaver’s more classic Nationalist homophobia did not. Baldwin’s peculiar usage of homophobic *language* to rhetorically signal the existence of “debased men” suggests the deployment of something that hinges upon and is always in proximity to anti-gayness, yet intends to function as a distinguishable sign of intraracial masculine abjection.

Baldwin’s response to Cleaver allows a particularly fertile space to consider the precarious relationship between homophobic speech, homophobia, and skepticism of black masculinity within the Black Power/Black Arts context. Terms of homophobic denunciations will be shown to splinter into corresponding disparagements reaching beyond homosexuality. In this respect, my examination of Baldwin’s response serves to consider the broader discourse in which it operated and the ideological sources on which it drew. In this respect, I draw on Eve Sedgwick in her path-breaking work *The Epistemology of the Closet* suggests, “A person who is disabled through a set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others” (emphasis in original).<sup>16</sup> To this end, Baldwin seems to evoke a type of curious semiotic sleight of hand by which he massages racially disabling gayness into racially able non-faggotry. That is to say, the “faggot” is a distinct articulation of emasculation in proximity to but not synonymous with homosexuality, which allows him the same counterpoint of dis-identity as the heterosexual Black Power masculinist, that of the discursively defined failed black masculine. Baldwin’s rhetoric, and it’s nuancing of Cleaver’s homophobic logic, signals the Black Arts’ primary means of rhetorically signifying black emasculation—the use of homophobic language to articulate black male failure. *No Name* makes use of discourse in which homophobic language, in its Black Power era iterations, is not solely or even primarily an attack on one’s sexuality but an attack on one’s manhood as a means of questioning racial authenticity *through* the language of sexuality. Moreover, it will be shown that Baldwin’s corroboration of Cleaver’s fears produced a black masculine paradigm in which heterosexuality did not absolve one from faggotry and thus black masculine failure. And conversely, black male gayness did not necessarily imply that one was a faggot, punk, or sissy. Thus, the “black faggot” must be considered as a term that imports racialized, gendered, and sexualized failures from numerous sources, not solely homosexuality.

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<sup>14</sup> Marlon Ross, “James Baldwin’s Sissy Heroics,” *African American Review*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Winter 2013) 633.

<sup>15</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 459.

<sup>16</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 32.



I must note that I undertake this reading of Baldwin with some trepidation. No single author, or for that matter single thinker, is dearer to me than James Baldwin. To focus upon the function of homophobic rhetoric in Baldwin within the context of his infamous discourse with Eldridge Cleaver may seem odd and perhaps unseemly. However, this is not an effort to vilify Baldwin as homophobic—such a conclusion would be a fundamental misunderstanding of my objective. Nor is mine an effort to absolve Cleaver of culpability for his words. My hope is that I, and to some humble extent others, may learn from Baldwin as we so often have before, yet here in a more counter-intuitive way. My intention is to utilize Baldwin’s response, always shadowed by the echoes of Cleaver’s claims, to locate and explicate a unique site of rhetorical slippage that is vital when considering what has become, in academic circles at least, the most contentious aspect of the Black Power/Black Arts ideology: homophobia and its pillaring role in the era’s conceptions of Black Nationalism. That is to say, *this* is not just a matter of Baldwin’s personal defensiveness or personal sexual politics (such a reading would be worthwhile). Rather Baldwin’s response is a critical site of analysis by which to consider discursive politics of black masculinity, racial authenticity and rhetoric of emasculation. Specifically, the implications of Baldwin leveraging homophobic rhetoric, grounded in Black Power/Black Arts ideology of black masculinity, to secure his own black manhood without denying his own sexual orientation.

### **Cleaver on Baldwin: “Notes on a Native Son” and Baldwin’s Racial Death Wish**

As this chapter will focus primarily on a close reading of Baldwin’s response to Cleaver I will limit my remarks on Cleaver to a review of his characterization of Baldwin within the purview of his polemical psychoanalysis of black male sexuality. Sustained analysis of Cleaver has been conducted by the likes of Lee Edelman, Phillip Brian Harper, Jared Sexton, Kathryn Stockton, Robert Reid-Pharr, Darieck Scott, Douglass Taylor and Michele Wallace, to name but a few sterling examples. For my purposes, Cleaver’s essay must receive explanation, primarily through aforementioned scholarly interpretations, in order to serve as the referential landmark of the more substantial task of considering Baldwin’s responses.

Douglass Taylor has usefully situated Cleaver’s homophobia as rooted, ironically, in the embracing of prevailing tenets of post-World War II American heteronormative Nationalist ideology. The nuclear family as a discursively imagined, and idealized, citizenry unit was Nation boiled down to its most foundational profile.<sup>17</sup> This was of course not solely a phenomenon of post-WWII, but rather a modern age development: the modern concept of nation and that of the “nuclear” family had long since been marching partners. However, the post WWII moment was characterized by mutually informing crises of white male anxiety and threatened Nationalist security. Specifically, Nationalism melded within a stiffly authoritarian cultural conception of

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<sup>17</sup>It should be noted that following chapters explicate how, while squaring whiteness with male normality, gender roles of post-WWII had the effect of effeminizing the white male in the conceptualizing of key Black Arts thinkers, namely Amiri Baraka.

appropriate citizen identity established under the regulatory hegemony of Cold War America.<sup>18</sup> Appropriate terms of citizenry behavior were secured by the public disciplining of menacing domestic threats to democracy that were vilified through the twin rhetorical scarlet letters of communism and homosexuality. Deviances from social normality whether political or private were thoroughly regulated through gender and family dynamics. As David Savran's study of historic anxieties of American white masculinity suggests, the nuclear family was a "crucial site for the consolidation and reproduction of the normative subject" in post-WWII America.<sup>19</sup> Heterosexuality, no matter how erotically tame, was the explicit lynchpin of the family as the primary signifier of gendered responsibilities and means of national reproductive maintenance. This all came in the context of a postwar economic boom that both leaned upon and reified the primacy of nuclear family to gendered consumptive practices. In such a schema homosexuality can be understood as a chaotic and decadent gendered insubordination of culturally and materially policed gender normality. Such behavior threatened the reactionary Nationalist conception of sexuality as a foundational means of national re-generation and a signal of familial stability and patriotism. In other words, to be gay was not only proof of personal wantonness but also an act of heresy that would eventually result in national collapse.

However for Cleaver, writing in the context of the mid-1960s, the adoption of this deeply rooted reactionary Nationalism received a distinctly racialized twist when applied to a specific consideration of *Black male* homosexuality in relation to a conception of Black Nationalism. As Lee Edelman has shown, Black homosexuality is not merely a sign of personal depravity for Cleaver but rather an act of cooperative racial submission and masochistic self-flagellation. Edelman puts forth that for Cleaver, the black homosexual (who is always male, a gendered specificity of consequence to which I will soon turn my attention) actively acquiescing to racial obedience to white supremacy assumes a state of sexual regression.<sup>20</sup> Darieck Scott echoes Edelman, stating that the black homosexual is both "too passive and too active";<sup>21</sup> that is to say, he is one whose sexuality actively promotes racial passivity. This active passivity denotes an agentive compliance with white supremacy's placation of black manhood.

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas Taylor, "Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer and Eldridge Cleaver on Race and Masculinity," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 52.1 (Spring 2010): 70-101. It is notable that Taylor's argument has perhaps the most dissimilar emphasis from the other works cited here. In effect Taylor asserts that homophobia is but a "cultural lexicon" by which Cleaver is chiefly invested in defending Norman Mailer's "White Negro" thesis. The majority of other scholars do account for this aspect of Cleaver's essay, perhaps Stockton and Savran best, however it is Taylor that is the key intervention in scholarship on Baldwin and Cleaver in the regard. Interestingly, in the course of this defense Taylor reads Cleaver as the one who advocates for potential universalism and interracial cooperation. Whereas, Baldwin in his, almost racially essentialist, mockery of what he perceives to be Mailer's black fetish rejects such prospects of transracial identity.

<sup>19</sup> David Savran, *Takin it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 36.

<sup>20</sup> Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in gay literary and cultural theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 30npage252, 44npage253.

<sup>21</sup> Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 174.

In Jared Sexton's words, homosexuality for Cleaver was a "sign" and "symptom" of "political disturbances."<sup>22</sup> Cleaver did not, at least in "Notes on a Native Son," use homophobic vernacularisms.<sup>23</sup> Thus, of course, such vernacular does not stand in to signify racial or masculine "failures." Rather than a referential hub of connotations upon which to vernacularly signify, gayness is literal, and thus *the* literal threat.<sup>24</sup> In this vein, Amy Ongiri has argued that Cleaver centralized the threat of homosexuality because he saw it as rupturing the traditional Nationalist paradigm of familialism as microcosm of Nation, essentially following the logic explained in the previous paragraph.<sup>25</sup> However, as Sexton and Fields have pointed out, and Ongiri has perhaps underemphasized, for Cleaver homosexuality is not simply a self-contained sexual deviance with only literal degenerative consequences for Black Nationhood. Rather homosexuality is an evidential symptom of intertwined psychological "disease" specifically that of racial self-loathing. William Spurlin, observes that Cleaver positions "homosexuality among blacks as a form of *ideological* penetration by whites" (emphasis original).<sup>26</sup> Spurlin's language, especially the choice of the word "penetration," is particularly apt as Cleaver recognized homosexuality as a *consequence* of *systemically* coerced self-hatred. The black male homosexual is a "white man in a black body,"<sup>27</sup> which is to say that Cleaver situates homosexuality as fundamentally a white male defect that black men are vulnerable to hosting. Moreover, the notion of a white man "in" a black body takes on the added connotation of literal physical entrance. However, physical acts of penetration would follow or occur concurrently rather than induce the emasculating psychological violation of racism. Put curtly, ideological penetration preceded, and invitingly induced, literal penetration.

Darieck Scott points out that Cleaver is "drawn to the bottom, as handy reference... for the harm done to black men."<sup>28</sup> What is more, the bottom is seemingly only the positionality

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<sup>22</sup> Jared Sexton, "Race, Sexuality, and Political Struggle: Reading *Soul on Ice*," *Social Justice* 30.2 (2003): 33.

<sup>23</sup> While he does not use the term, the shadow of "the faggot" does certainly hover around his theorization. Cleaver's polemic serves as the most candid exploration of the associated tropes of what would become the reoccurring BAM figure of the "black faggot." However, for my purposes it is the significance of the distinction between the evoking of the figure and the explicit naming of the figure that is telling. While Cleaver's explicit exploration of the black homosexual conjures the "black faggot," the explicit naming of "the black faggot" needn't necessarily centralize homosexuality as its primary degradation of the signified, as will be shown through my reading of Baldwin's usage of the term.

<sup>24</sup> Cleaver did however use homophobic slurs as means of general emasculation consistently through his public career. In this instance it is telling such language, which was not uncommon to his orations, is not included in his consideration of black homosexuality in "Notes on a Native Son." It would seem that for Cleaver which homophobic epithet was used as rhetorical tool to emasculate that homosexuality was emasculated threat to blackness that required explication.

<sup>25</sup> Amy Ongiri, "We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination," *College Literature* 24.1 (Feb. 1997): 280-294.

<sup>26</sup> William Spurlin, "Culture, Rhetoric and Queer Identity: James Baldwin and Identity Politics of Race and Sexuality," in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 113.

<sup>27</sup> Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 101.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 164.

occupied by black male homosexuals. Moreover, his logic of black homosexuality's meaning necessarily requires an inter-racial affair. Baldwin is Cleaver's prime example of this thinking. While Cleaver speaks at length about the psychological impetus that leads to Baldwin "bending over for the white man,"<sup>29</sup> a reversal of roles seems literally unimaginable. As Michelle Wallace famously pointed out, the prospect of literally "fucking the white man" and all the seemingly insurgent implications within the strain of logic that Cleaver presents, is never considered.<sup>30</sup> As Wallace's reading suggests, in Cleaver's schema it is the incapacity of the black homosexual to "fuck" that is the catalyst for, and concurrently causation of, psychological castration, which ends in the racial self-loathing manifested as a physical act of homosexuality.

To return to Reid-Pharr's approach, in effect Cleaver reduces or deemphasizes varying black male dissimilarities by inducing homosexuality as a chasm of intraracial otherness. Cleaver's paradigm has the effect of condensing differences between black men by consolidating the geneses of dissimilarity to a single distinction: sexuality. Homosexuality as racial insubordination has the impact suturing comparably mild intraracial fractures as minor. To borrow from the terminology of Cathy Cohen, these sexualized "boundaries of blackness"

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<sup>29</sup> Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso Books), 68. It is interesting to consider that the implications of Wallace's reasoning as they pertain to Cleaver's reading of *Another Country*, and in particular his consideration of Rufus. Rufus serves as Cleaver's primary example of Baldwin's supposed investment in emasculative representations of black men. As Cleaver puts it Rufus, "lets a white homosexual bisexual man fuck him in the ass." However, there is, to my reading, no definitive evidence in the novel that Rufus is being penetrated in the course of his liaisons with men. Further consideration of Rufus and his relationships merits its own space that is outside of the purview of this project. Scholars such as Josh Kun, James Dievler, Matt Brim, Stephanie Dunning provide compelling readings of Rufus. Returning to Cleaver's evaluation of Rufus; it is clear Cleaver centralizes penetration as the primary action that indicates white domination, while being penetrated indicates racial obedience, emasculation. What is more, as noted, the penetrated is the only black homosexual identity Cleaver seems to acknowledge, or even comprehend. It would seem that Cleaver couldn't dissociate black homosexuality with interracial penetration of black men. That is to say Rufus *must* be being "fucked in the ass" because this is the very nature of black homosexuality; that of sexually manifested racial self-loathing. However, returning to Wallace, and her suggestion of Cleaver's incomplete schema of race, sexuality and power, Rufus may in fact be the unattended final figure she suggests is missing from Cleaver's framework; the black man who fucks white men. This act Wallace's suggests would seem to indicate the ultimate display of interracial power following Cleaver's logic. The significance of this prospect, Rufus as insurgent penetrator, rather than racially degraded penetrated, take on added weight when Baldwin seems corroborates Cleaver's concerns in *No Name*. Rufus as, if not explicitly penetrator certainly domineering in both his gay and straight interracial relationships, suggest that Baldwin recognizes a distinctly racialized power distinction between penetrated and penetrator that would, at root, coincide with Cleaver's overall thesis. However, it would diverge from Cleaver in the sense that Rufus as black interracial penetrator would not suffer from the type of emasculated racial self-loathing within the schema of homosexual interracial domination that Cleaver suggests. That is to say, Rufus seemingly retains his masculinity, and blackness, within his same sex interracial relationships.

expediently exclude, and give name to the excluded as a means of forcefully homogenizing a definition of masculine racial authenticity.

In large part, Cleaver's assertion of Baldwin's racial "death wish" is made in defense of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the protest novel masterpiece of Baldwin's literary father figure. As well as an initially curious protection of Norman Mailer's "The White Negro," the psychoanalytic essay on race and manhood of Baldwin's friend and rival. Cleaver defends Wright's propensity to couple masculine tropes of violence and sexual virility with black resistance and Mailer's support of naturalist claims of black masculine essentialisms as a source of revelatory vitality for white people. Cleaver cites Baldwin's published critiques of Wright, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949) and "Alas Poor Richard" (1961) and of Mailer's "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" (1961) as textual evidence of Baldwin's personal fear and loathing of the power of black manhood. Cleaver cites these essays as authentication of Baldwin's inability "to recognize the stud in others."<sup>31</sup> While the focus of the essay is Baldwin's racialized masculine failure, the flip side is the achievement of Wright and Mailer in articulating the fundamental congruence of blackness and manhood.

Baldwin serves as an archetype on which to draw categorical conclusions that substantiate Cleaver's boundary building. For Cleaver, James Baldwin was a publically available embodiment of the black homosexual pathologies. The likes of Baldwin, were "castrated in the center of his burning skull."<sup>32</sup> Although, as has been mentioned, this psychic castration is understood to be a coercive measure of white male supremacy, Cleaver understood Baldwin to be simultaneously engaged in a "psychological succumbing"<sup>33</sup> that manifested not solely as an involuntarily induced psychic condition but as a masochistic interracial obedience. Baldwin is vilified for causing collateral damage to black manhood at large in the midst of his personal "racial death wish."<sup>34</sup> His personal failures lent themselves to the lucidity of an individual example in the charting of categorical black emasculation of gayness and the connotative social failure of gayness. Baldwin's racial failure becomes a legible map of black masculine failure with which to navigate a terrain that personally elucidates categorical implications regarding gay black men.

### **A Place in the Crowd: *No Name in the Street* and Baldwin at an Impasse**

*Soul On Ice* essentially is Eldridge Cleaver's literary canon. Yes, he was for a time a staff writer for *Ramparts Magazine* and subsequently the *Black Panther Newspaper*.<sup>35</sup> Yes, in 1978 he published the less than celebrated autobiographical sequel to *Soul On Ice*, *Soul on Fire*. And yes, his writings, primarily from the aforementioned publications, have been collected and anthologized in *Target Zero: The Collected Writings of Eldridge Cleaver*.<sup>36</sup> However, all of these texts are adjunctive. *Soul On Ice* remains the written document wedded to historical

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<sup>31</sup> Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 106.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>35</sup> Between 1966-1967 *Ramparts Magazine* published a number of essays Cleaver had written while incarcerated which would later be published collectively as *Soul on Ice*.

<sup>36</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Fire* (Waco, Texas: Word Book, 1978), *Target Zero: A Life in Writing-Eldridge Cleaver*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

considerations of Cleaver. The student of History knows him through the book, and the student of Literature knows the book through him, as Historical figure.

Conversely, *No Name in the Street* reflects a precarious *moment* in the long, winding career of James Baldwin as author, theorist and public figure. Like those members of the beloved community of the Civil Rights Movement at large, Baldwin, in the whirlwinds of a fluctuating stage of the Civil Rights era, shifted, for some, from prophet to scapegoat; *No Name* serving as a gasp from this state of impasse. For many Baldwin scholars and African Americanist Literary scholars, *No Name*, and in particular its stark engagement with Black Power era discourse, represents a watershed moment in Baldwin's personal politics as well as the quality of his literature. On the whole, scholars of Baldwin cite *No Name* along with the 1973 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (which drew greatly on the themes and biographic specifics of *No Name*) as illustrative of Baldwin's depleting authorial mastery and receding status as prophetic pundit of the African American folk pulse.

Consuela Francis is quite right when she notes that upon initial publication *No Name* received "at best, mixed reviews."<sup>37</sup> Mel Watkins' *New York Times* review and Todd Gitlin's in *The Nation* serves as the most prominent instance of generous appraisal, calling the essay often "mesmerizing", "beautiful", and "insightful and musing."<sup>38</sup> However, on the whole, reviews from mainstream publications were far from glowing. In part critical reception should be understood in the context of the landmark essay that *No Name* followed, as it was the first full-length published essay since his critically acclaimed *The Fire Next Time*.<sup>39</sup> Expectations for *No Name* were high, and the consequences of its reception are significant. Baldwin's influence in public racial discourse was waning in the shadows of a cadre of Black Nationalist public voices. *No Name* seemed a moment in which his comparatively more politically moderate audience anticipated a sequel to *Fire*; an essay of controlled volatility followed by an echoing resonance of pleading hope. This was not what they received. Future interracial harmony took a back seat to the immediacies of black survival. The essay was scolded as rambling, lacking structure and

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<sup>37</sup> Consuela Francis, *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin, 1963-2010* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2006), 112.

<sup>38</sup> Mel Watkins, "The Fire Next Time This Time" in *James Baldwin (Bloom's Modern Critical Views)* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 182, Todd Gitlin, "Yet Will I Maintain Mine Own Ways Before Him," *Nation*, April 10, 1972, 469-470.

<sup>39</sup> Baldwin had however published expansively in multiple fictional mediums between *Fire Next Time* in 1963 and *No Name in the Street* in 1972. In between the two essay Baldwin wrote and published one novel *Tell Me How Long the Train Has Been Gone* (1969), two plays, each of which would take a turn on Broadway, *Blues For Mister Charlie* (1964) and *Amen Corner* (1968), a collection of short stories *Going To Meet the Man* (1965) and a published conversation with Margaret Mead titled *A Rap on Race* (1971). Finally, in the same year *No Name* was published Baldwin would release what had originally meant to be a screenplay for a forthcoming biographic film on Malcolm X called *One Day When I was Lost: A Scenario Based on Alex Haley's Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1972).

disingenuousness in tone and message.<sup>40</sup> The reoccurring source of disappointment in reviews, in my reading, is steeped in a discomfort with Baldwin's increased commitment to the Black Nationalist leanings of younger intellectuals.

Henry Louis Gates has stated that Baldwin had at this stage lost his "critical independence" and began to "mouth a script that was not his own."<sup>41</sup> Biographer William Weatherby notes a *Newsweek* Article that goes as far as to say that to Baldwin's "Noble rage had become a kind of truculent belligerence."<sup>42</sup> For Gates, *Newsweek*, and scores of others, Baldwin and the quality of his writing had fallen victim to a desire to appease and be embraced by a generation of activists and writers whose identities were in part secured through candid renouncements of Baldwin as an iconic embodiment of the Civil Rights generation supposed failures. Here the gendered languages of Baldwin's embrace of Black Nationalist themes take on particular primacy. Reflecting on Baldwin's adaptation of black radical "masculine heterosexual's rhetoric," Douglass Fields tamely names this a "curious twist"<sup>43</sup> primarily catalyzed by the anxiety of his declining status amongst a younger generation. Rolland Murray notes that Baldwin sought to achieve black support, which he believed had dwindled in this generational transition from Civil Rights to Black Power, by "affirming the centrality of masculinist social structures in forging a radical political agenda."<sup>44</sup> Baldwin may have, as he would tell Henry Louis Gates many years later, been attempting to "undo the damage" of the attacks by Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and of course Cleaver.<sup>45</sup> However, this understandable reflexive personal defense did not neutralize critiques of Baldwin's deference to masculinism. Michele Wallace's classic Feminist work *Black Macho and the Myth of Black Superwomen* most famously addresses Baldwin's acquiescence to phallogentric aspects of Black Power politics.

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<sup>40</sup> See the following as examples of highly critical mainstream reviews; David Brudnoy, "Blues for Mr. Baldwin," *National Review* July 7, 1972, 750-51; DeMott Benjamin, "James Baldwin and the Sixties: Acts and Revelations," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 159; Peter Prescott, "The Train's Long Gone," *Newsweek*, May 29, 1972, 85-87; *Kirkus Review*, May 26, 1972. Also, see Consuela Francis *The Critical Reception of James Baldwin* for discussion of the relative neglect of reviewers towards *No Name*.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Louis Gates, "The Fire Last Time," *The New Republic*, last modified August 2, 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/114134/henry-louis-gates-james-baldwin-fire-last-time>.

<sup>42</sup> William J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artists on Fire* (New York: Laurel Publishing, 1990), 309.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Field, *James Baldwin: Writers and Their Works* (New York: Northcote House Publishing), 39.

<sup>44</sup> Rolland Murray, *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power and Masculine Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 13-40. While Murray's assertion rings true in respect to *No Name* he reads Baldwin's novel *Tell Me How Long the Train Has Been Gone* as countering any prevailing narrative that Baldwin fully adopted Nationalist masculinism. Murray argues that Baldwin's greatly neglected novel is evidence that his fiction, in contrast to non-fiction texts of the period, reveals a more ambiguous and often contentious, relationship to themes of Black Power era phallogentricism. Murray's reading of Baldwin and other novelist of the period are pivotal in recognizing the diversity of representations of manhood in Black Power era novels.

<sup>45</sup> Gates, "The Fire Last Time."

Wallace believed that *No Name* and *Beale Street* were evidence of Baldwin “glorifying the primitivism of the black man”; Wallace states satirically that Baldwin had “finally seen the light” provided by Black Machos like Cleaver’s.<sup>46</sup> Following Wallace’s lead, preeminent black feminist scholars Trudier Harris and Hortense Spillers would go on to make comparable critiques of the gender politics of *Beale Street* that greatly link to concerns regarding the gender politics of *No Name*.<sup>47</sup>

However, as Quentin Miller has recently chronicled, *No Name* is increasingly receiving overdue credit as an essential text in Baldwin’s evolution as craftsman and critic.<sup>48</sup> *No Name* is a signal text in the objective to revisit and revise, what Dagmawi Woubshet calls, the long standing “declension narrative” of Baldwin’s career.<sup>49</sup> The likes of Lynes, Woubshet, Miller, Consuela Francis, Magdalena Zaborowska, Douglass Taylor, Lynn Orilla Scott and Nathaniel Mills have, through various guises, effectively pushed back against the notion that *No Name*, as well as his novels of the same period, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone*, are indicative of corroding authorial control and conciliatory alliance with younger radicals. Indeed, such scholarship shows that Baldwin’s turn from liberalism to radicalism was a critical response to the blitz of interracial violence experienced during the Civil Rights era, more than an acquiesce to coercive intraracial pressure. Usurping the narrative of Baldwin’s post *Fire* decline, these scholars point to *No Name*, in particular its innovative structural and narrative elements, as evidence of Baldwin’s willingness to break with convention and experiment with the essay form. The non-linear structure of the text, jumping around temporally and thematically, worked to buttress Baldwin’s interrogation of the tenuousness of “natural” conceptions of male sexuality and liberal conceptions of national progress.

Baldwin had always explored the intersection, indeed the mutual constitutive dynamics, of race, gender, sexuality and nationality. Further, the complexities, restrictions and, albeit repressed, possibilities of American masculinity was a recurrent theme. Most vividly in the 1965 short story *Going to Meet the Man*, Baldwin’s consideration of the black condition wrestled with the fact few things are more germane to American heritage than white masculine angst, and it innumerable fallouts. The hallmark of white masculinity is a fragility that underlies performances of brash authority, and a primary index of such dimly veiled angst has been the projection of fears and desires on black bodies as corporeal reservoir of repressed physic anguish. White masculine angst transmutes into material black vulnerability, and black suffering ensures white male social patriarchy. Yet, *No Name*, as a work of non-fiction, and a very

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<sup>46</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho*, 73, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Trudier Harris, “The Eyes as Weapons in *If Beale Street Could Talk*,” *Melus* 5.3 (Autumn 1978): 54-66; Hortense Spillers, “The Politics of Intimacy: A Discussion,” in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, ed. Roseann Bell, Bettye Parker, Beverly Guy-Scheftall (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 87-106.

<sup>48</sup> See Quentin Miller, “Trends in James Baldwin Criticism 2010-13” *James Baldwin Review* Vol. 3. 2017: 186-202. See the more expansive bibliographic essay from which Quentin Miller’s survey builds; Consuela Francis. “Reading and Theorizing James Baldwin: A Bibliographic Essay,” *James Baldwin Review* Vol 1. 2015 179-89.

<sup>49</sup> “James Baldwin’s Late Style: A Sketch on Privacy” in “James Baldwin and the Question of Privacy: A Roundtable Conversation at the 2014 American Studies Convention: Brian Norman, Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman, John E. Drabinski, Julius Fleming, Nigel Hatton, Dagmawi Woubset, Magdalena Zaborowska,” *James Baldwin Review* Vol. 1. 2015; 214.



personal essay at that, is unique in that it expressly centers the racial implications of homosocial anxiety on contemporary landscape and public figures (including himself). Building on Emmanuel Nelson, Lynn Orilla Scott notes that before *No Name* Baldwin's non-fiction was less apt to consider the theme of homosexuality as compared to his novels, where it was a consistent topic since *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. Zaborowska's writes that in *No Name* Baldwin centered "racialized queer identity,"<sup>50</sup> specifically the hazardous terms of masculine angst in this new stage of his Civil Rights analysis. Homosexuality was an all but prohibited discussion in perusal of Civil Rights and shifted to even more contentious matter in the turn to Black Power.

Baldwin's express focus on the nexus of racism, masculine angst and, in Zaborowska's terming, "homosexual panic,"<sup>51</sup> corresponded with his turn away from the liberal imperatives of interracial national reconciliation as express goals. Woubshet compels us to consider how Baldwin's texts published in the early twilight of Black Power/Black Arts, suggest a "shift in emphasis from the interracial to the intra-racial..."<sup>52</sup> Zaborowska locates the masculine anxiety "on both sides of the color line,"<sup>53</sup> as central to Baldwin's reading of the turbulent political climate. Moreover, Baldwin's extensive discussion of his own "dubious" sexuality in the midst of both inter- and intraracial "homosexual panic" traversed perhaps the Civil Rights Movement's greatest taboo. To this end, Nathaniel Mills provides a close reading of the Eldridge Cleaver dynamic that, similar to my own analysis, grounds Baldwin's personal disidentification from Cleaver's attack in *No Name*'s broader focus on the "erotic guilt" that underlies and compels white power. In a sense, *No Name* identifies, and through keen acts of rhetorical signifying, takes to task the very dynamics of gendered and sexualized anxiety that is projected upon him. In Zaborowska's words, echoing E. Patrick Johnson, "Baldwin was targeting "the dick thang" of all hues."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as I explore the context of his response to Cleaver, Baldwin did not back down from his attacks, he leaned into them by adapting the terms of critique.

The accuracy of various subjective analyses aside, these assorted critiques amplify specific aspects of a fundamental truth; by the publication of *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin's politics had changed and so did his tone and the style of his prose. Whether these changes were a consequence of intraracial pressure or a result of earnest frustration or revelation is up for debate; and each side has evidence to substantiate their case. Nevertheless, what is clear is that he had become less forgiving of his "countrymen" and less focused upon moral redemption of the nation. Subsistence emerged as paramount for black Americans in Baldwin's estimation and not without reason.<sup>55</sup> *No Name* should be read as it was written, with Baldwin wading in the social flames that he had prophesized nearly a decade earlier in his celebrated classic, *The Fire Next Time*. That is to say, "Next Time" was now and the fire was, and had been for some time, raging. As opposed to the prophetic forewarning of *Fire*'s messianic call for collective redemption

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<sup>50</sup>Zaborowska, *Erotics of Exile*, 209.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>52</sup> "James Baldwin's Late Style," 214.

<sup>53</sup> Zaborowska, *Erotics of Exile*, 199.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 209 and originally in *Appropriating Blackness*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> In a sense, "survival" had always been a fundamental theme for Baldwin. However, formally, in *Fire Next Time* or *Notes of Native Son*, Baldwin situated literal black survival in Christian ethos inducing the salvation of white American souls from the collective fears and anxieties from which racism sprung. Conversely, in *No Name* survival was matter of living in spite of the inability of their white countrymen to be saved.

rooted in Christian ethos, and centered on the pressing need for white moral salvation, *No Name* delivers a report that stages national discord as a genesis for political reordering and black self-determination.

The shift in tone and authorial position represents a most pronounced change in the narrative quality of Baldwin's Jeremiadic appeal.<sup>56</sup> In *No Name in the Street* the sentences alternate between being concise and curt to longer and denser than ever. They stream with a fervor that conveys a panic that if everything is not said at once he may not live to say it later. This does not mean that Baldwin has necessarily lost control as a writer. Rather, his writing reflects/comments on a lack of control in the country, on the nature of repression, and on the brewing and erupting methods of resistance. Baldwin states frankly, "It is true political freedom is a matter of power and nothing to do with morality...."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the power that Baldwin seeks, and believes is growing in younger generation of black people, is complex and distinct. This power is not a reproduction of the moral and organizational white American model that he forewarned in *The Fire Next Time*. In *No Name* Baldwin suggests that western power will only be challenged in the presence of "another power...which it does not know how to define."<sup>58</sup> It is not entirely clear that Baldwin can define this power either, but it is constituted by "energy"<sup>59</sup> and aim is undoubtedly just. This energy, while uncertain, is emerging in the face of longstanding certain oppression and Baldwin leaves the impression that there is material bottom line; that for this new power to develop it must protect itself, and indeed confront the old power. Baldwin recounts startling a friend by saying "nothing we could do would prevent, at last, an open confrontation."<sup>60</sup> Militant rhetoric and deliberateness make Baldwin appear highly affected by pervasive modes of black social critique; any tone of the omniscient distant intellectual vanishes.

The anger and dizzying pace of this essay, while often interpreted as authorial belligerence that encouraged a prolix and "spotty and discontinuous" narrative style,<sup>61</sup> has the impact of aligning Baldwin with the pervasive aesthetic of black letters of the moment—The Black Arts Movement. If it is fair to say anything categorical about The Black Arts Movement it can be said it aimed to develop and employ what Addison Gayle, Larry Neal, and others termed a "Black Aesthetic." While its primary proponents at times had contentiously conflicted views on the definition of *the* "Black Aesthetic," it consistently was envisioned as exalting a literary style

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<sup>56</sup> The arch of James Baldwin career as a prophetic figure in tradition of African American Jeremiads is considered at length, at superbly in Lawrire Balfour, *The Evidence of the Things of Unsaid: James Baldwin and Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 409.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>61</sup> DeMott Benjamin, "James Baldwin and the Sixties: Acts and Revelations," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 159.

inflected with the oratory and vernacular of an urban folk constituency.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Black Arts practitioners, however they defined the Black Aesthetic, brazenly snubbed standards of Western literary custom in order to evoke a sort of aesthetic insurgency against supposed classic form and convention. As Hoyt Fuller would put it, with a hint of hyperbole that gave the Black Arts its swagger, the “revolt is as palpable in letters as it is in the streets.”<sup>63</sup> In turn, the revolt against “western form” was meant to engender a literary style more accessible and relatable to the experiences of black folk masses, one rooted in oration and vernacular. As Gayle stated, “The black artist has given up the futile practice of speaking to whites and has begun to speak to his brother.”<sup>64</sup> E. Francis White’s states that *No Name* represents a shift wherein Baldwin “seemed to be writing for an increasingly black audience rather than for white liberals.”<sup>65</sup> To White’s assessment I would add that the essay’s pace and tone match broader ideological strokes of the African American literary context in which it was written and suggests that his desired audience primarily be those invested in the protest politics of Black Arts aestheticism.

Scholars are right to point out the significance of overt adoption of Black Power era rhetoric and, I would add, Black Arts literary tropes. Specifically, it is in the meaning of manhood that Baldwin’s noisier assertions found lungs. Baldwin’s characterizations of manhood in *No Name* are distinctly naturalized when coupled with Baldwin’s persisting belief in race as an ascribed social reality born of repressed social anxieties. Manhood is deemed an embodied “fact” existing before, and naturally determining, specific social determinants that confirm or deform its cultural legibility. Conversely, race, although similarly embodied, was a collection of socially inaugurated meanings projected onto bodies. To put it another way: masculinity is the social verification of the biological fact of manhood and race is the socially made term by which masculinity is gauged.

In *No Name* manhood is articulated as the determinable fact that resides both literally and figuratively between one’s legs. Baldwin states that “a man without balls is no man at all; the word *genesis* describes the male, involves the phallus and refers to the seed that gives life.”<sup>66</sup> Baldwin explains that the white male’s refusal to acknowledge black manhood results in the “abdication of his [the black male’s] estate,”<sup>67</sup> effectively socially castrating the black male. While Baldwin is, as with all discussions of white anxiety surrounding black masculinity, alluding to the harrowing shadows of literal castrations central to black male lynching, he is more pointedly evoking the type of figurative emasculation of Cleaver’s “skull castration.” In Baldwin’s estimation “It is absolutely certain that the white men invented the nigger’s big black prick...” The mutually constitutive abjection of the racialized “nigger” to his monstrous “prick”

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<sup>62</sup> The best example of explicit intraracial division over the meaning of *the* Black Aesthetic is found, appropriately, Addison Gayle’s 1972 edited collection *The Black Aesthetic*. This collection included essays, from proponents of the Black Aesthetic from various, and conflicting, perspectives of the terms meaning and it the stakes of meaning. Chapter 3 will look at this collection in detail.

<sup>63</sup> Hoyt Fuller, “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” in *The Black Aesthetic* ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 4.

<sup>64</sup> Addison Gayle, “Introduction,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, xxi.

<sup>65</sup> Francis White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 173.

<sup>66</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 392.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 392.

is that which disallows the capacity of white men to recognize *black* as congruent with *manhood*. As Baldwin sees it, the intensified state of sexuality beyond the boundaries of human subjectivity stymies the capacity to fulfill the social role of man. The production of this social myth of racialized sexuality is at the crux of Baldwin's efforts to explain and rectify the experience of black social death.

As Dwight McBride has keenly noted, in a manner that anticipated Hazel Carby, Baldwin often wrote non-fiction and spoke publically from the position of a type of "representative black man."<sup>68</sup> In *No Name*, E. Francis White points out that Baldwin, posing as figurative representative, takes on both an assumed and often explicitly alluded to heterosexuality.<sup>69</sup> The fact of black manhood's social warping is symbolized through Baldwin necessarily contextualizing "the black man" within the purview of heteronormative familial dynamics. As such, this representative black male figure is described in relation to "his wife," "his woman," and "his children."<sup>70</sup> Subsequently, implications of racialized gender inequity are explained through the repercussions on man's capacity to assume a gendered position in relation to his female partner and children. That is to say, Baldwin's "estate" of manhood is one of social markers grounded in gendered responsibilities. The naturalized role of man is legible or conversely denied legibility via its relationship to heteronormative family responsibility; of course, these responsibilities splinter into the domestic and public. Consequently, Baldwin's articulation of black male incapacitation is greatly tethered to the material limits and psychological ramifications of restricted access to social, political, and economic manifestations of hetero-patriarchal manhood. In *No Name* Baldwin positions the potential of black manhood as a recovery process out of what we may now call a queered gendering, into the normative masculinity; a logic that fits squarely with Black Arts masculinism.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> McBride emphasizes that this narrative trope has the effect of shadowing Baldwin's own sexuality while allowing him suspended entrance to imagined black masculine authenticity. Hazel Carby has discussed dynamics of Baldwin's rhetoric in respect to the historical figure of the "Race Man" as arbitrator of African American politics more broadly.

<sup>69</sup> White, *Dark Continent*, 176.

<sup>70</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 62. Baldwin famously uses similar rhetoric in a 1968 interview on the *Dick Cavet Show*. This interview is a featured site of analysis for Dwight McBride in the essay "Straight Black Studies" in *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality*.

<sup>71</sup> On this point, it is necessary to distinguish between my specific reading of *No Name In The Street* and James Baldwin's works of fiction, which consider black masculinity and the subject and prospects of queerness in vastly different ways. Black masculinity, while still under both subtle and candid social assault, is not *fundamentally* compromised through socially taboo relations such as interracial love, homosexual love, homosexual interracial love, incestual homosexual love etc. In works such *Another Country*, *Tell Me How Long the Train has Been Gone*, and *Just Above My Head* black masculinity remains tenable for those in same sex relationship and is often psychologically or spiritually liberatory as consequence of non-normative male relationships. It can, and has been many times, argued that fiction allowed Baldwin the means to publicly articulate his considerations of queerness and restrictions of heteronormativity. For instances scholars such as Matt Brim, Roland Murray and Keith Clarke, taking their critical queues from the likes of Harper, Reid-Pharr, Blount & Cunningham and McBride, have examined how Baldwin produces alternative possibilities of black masculinity within the realm of fiction.

### **In Regard to the Watchful Zealot: *No Name* and The Discourse of Baldwin's Response to Cleaver**

While the authorial tone is hurried the essay is belabored in length. *No Name in the Street* is, like *The Fire Next Time*, a single essay written in two parts with a total of 128 pages. It is the longest single piece of non-fiction in Baldwin's canon. The length is notable for several reasons. As noted, scholars and cultural critics have cited the length as evidence of failing authorial control or, as I have conversely suggested, aiding in the achievement of an intended chaos. However, length is noteworthy here in order to contextualize Baldwin's direct response to Eldridge Cleaver amidst his broader ruminations on race and manhood. Baldwin's direct response to Cleaver and *Soul On Ice* is less than two pages. Cleaver's name appears in the essay only four times, twice in the section of direct discussion of *Soul On Ice*. David Leeming characterizes the response as strictly diplomatic. As he sees it, Baldwin wishes to placate any tension with one of the individuals whom Baldwin regarded as "the future of the Civil Rights Movement."<sup>72</sup> However, the swiftness of the discussion does not imply its marginality nor should it indicate merely a diplomatic nod from Baldwin meant to placate generational discord. Rather, there is something condensed in Baldwin's consideration of Cleaver that permeates the essay. The concentrated moment at which Cleaver is addressed has broader implications regarding Baldwin's alignment with Black Power masculinity and its dependence upon homophobic vernacular as discourse of emasculated black inauthenticity.

Baldwin's private response to *Soul On Ice* was one of justifiable indignation and forced compromise. As Baldwin saw it, the derisively personal nature of Cleaver's essays had "handicapped" his ability to publicly respond; he reasonably believed that anything he wrote would be interpreted as defensive feuding.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Baldwin did not see Cleaver as being in his artistic class or as his intellectual equal and his slander seemed little more than that of "preposterous."<sup>74</sup> Baldwin privately dismissed Cleaver's revolutionary bravado and the substance of "Notes on a Native Son" to biographer William Weatherby by saying "all that toy soldier did is call me gay."<sup>75</sup> While Baldwin's personal responses were that of frustration towards an ungracious upstart, his direct literary response was brief and ostensibly diplomatic and subtle.

In the essay Baldwin, referring directly to Cleaver's treatment of him in *Soul On Ice*, states that while he "did not like" what Cleaver had to say about him he respected him as "valuable and rare," understood his position, and shared the substance of his concerns. Baldwin identified Cleaver as "a zealous watchman on the city wall" who had regarded Baldwin as a "dangerously odd, badly twisted and fragile reed, of too much use to the Establishment to be trusted by blacks."<sup>76</sup> Cleaver was a keeper of black boundaries. One whose position as

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<sup>72</sup> David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 292.

<sup>73</sup> Jordan Elgrably and George Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction LXXVIII: James Baldwin," in *Conversations With James Baldwin* ed. Fred Stanley and Louis Pratt (University of Mississippi press, 1989), 252.

<sup>74</sup> Julius Lester, "James Baldwin: Reflections of a Maverick," in *Conversation with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred R. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1989. Press), 224.

<sup>75</sup> Weatherby, *Artist on Fire*, 292.

<sup>76</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 459.

“watchman” entailed his own authority of the terms by which blackness was to appropriately exist within the “city wall.” The “city” is implied to be the metaphoric site of collective racial authenticity that, like any Nationalist conception, is in great part distinguished and secured by borders, or “city walls,” and their guardians. The choice of the word “watchman” highlights Cleaver as preoccupied with monitoring homosocial activity. Baldwin centralizes male relations as *the* central, even if sub-conscious, occupation of those concerned with black authenticity, with Cleaver as exalted representative of arbitrating authenticity.

Baldwin appoints Cleaver a sort of Foucauldian observatory positionality; a designated disciplinarian who spots and subsequently publicly regulates rogue faux black men scaling the fraternal boundary. In this respect Baldwin does grant, or merely acknowledge, Cleaver a degree of authority. As noted, Baldwin did see or, as private response implied, despairingly accept Cleaver as “one of the future leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.”<sup>77</sup> However, Baldwin in the same move that grants Cleaver authority underhandedly calls into question the resources from which Cleaver draws to assume such a devoted watchfulness. The phrasing of “zealous watchmen” can be read as rather a keen act of signifying by Baldwin. Baldwin pairs Cleaver’s position as altruistic racial border protector with that of a homoerotic voyeur preoccupied with watching men. The figurative border of racial authenticity is governed by Cleaver’s “zealous” capacity to determine the masculine qualities. The role of “watchmen” codifies an acknowledgment of the homoerotic undertone of Cleaver’s homophobia. The homoerotic implications of Cleaver’s attack on Baldwin are by now almost standard to interpretation by scholars invested in an excavation of the erotic implications of Cleaver’s rhetoric.<sup>78</sup> Baldwin’s language anticipates such explicit critical queer readings and produces such a critique with a restrained and knowing wink.

Baldwin continues his naming of Cleaver as “zealous watchmen”: “I do not say this with a sneer.”<sup>79</sup> Baldwin’s qualifying statement implies that the label of “zealous watchmen” could and perhaps expectedly would be appropriately understood as mockingly scornful. In other words, Baldwin calls attention to the sneer-worthy quality of his labeling of Cleaver as “zealous watchmen.” Baldwin’s disavowal of the sneer seems to ironically allow and perhaps heighten the sardonic implications of naming Cleaver a fervent observer of men. Baldwin tells reader that, whether he himself is sneering or not, sneering should have been anticipated and thus required qualification. The subliminal slander of Baldwin’s word choice obliquely implies that Cleaver is positioned atop a boundary where he monitors black men for racially compromising emasculation. From such a position Baldwin grants Cleaver the capacity to deem whom should stand where, connoting his capacity to recognize the terms of each side, and in this case his certainty that Baldwin sexuality renders him racially untrustworthy and should not be trusted on the black side of the city wall. Zaborowska compellingly suggests Baldwin’s cautious response gestures Baldwin’s recognition of Cleaver’s unattended “homosexual panic.”<sup>80</sup> In her words Baldwin likely understood that “in assaulting him, the older black male artists...he (Cleaver) was also assaulting a part of himself.”<sup>81</sup> I agree with this reading and suggest that perhaps Baldwin’s

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<sup>77</sup> Lemming, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, 292.

<sup>78</sup> Please refer to the scholars whose works inform my section “Cleaver on Baldwin,” pages 5-8.

<sup>79</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 459.

<sup>80</sup> Zaborowska, Magdalena, *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotic’s of Exile*, (Durham; Duke University Press, 2009), 197-248.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 232.

diplomacy cloaked a more a critical, be it sly, proclamation regarding Cleaver. Baldwin seems to want to both acknowledge Cleaver as one in a position of power while concurrently undercutting the terms by which his status is largely founded. Baldwin implies that, at core, Cleaver's neurotic preoccupation with identifying and repressing "debased males" is the manifestation of a personal anxiety. Namely, that Cleaver himself may be the debased male, and thus the infiltrated unauthentic black male whom he was meant to safeguard the city from.

It may seem that Baldwin is veiling the colloquial "It takes one to know one," or perhaps more accurately, be it more obliquely, "it takes one to *make* one"; outing Cleaver as one whose psychoanalytic expertise of the racial implications of homosexuality is proof of his own not-so-closeted yet deeply anxious homosexuality. In other words, Baldwin suggests that readers consider exactly how Cleaver can be sure that he "knows one when he sees one" as watcher of the wall. This reading of Baldwin is complicated, however not undone or even necessarily undermined as he goes on to corroborate Cleaver's central concern regarding the racial threat of emasculation. While Baldwin seems to knowingly jab at Cleaver's sexuality the threat that Cleaver seeks to keep at bay is not one Baldwin sneers at.

Baldwin states, "I was confused in his mind with the untreatable 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 once."<sup>82</sup> Cleaver had simply and excusably "confused" *him* with those who were in fact the "debasement of the male": those "faggots, punks and sissies" whose abject status he believed must have induced Cleaver to literal sickness. Baldwin's distinguishing himself from these figures suggests the embrace of two important points of the Black Power/Arts era masculinist logic considered in this study. First, these imagined incarcerated figures are in fact, unlike Baldwin, representative of the "debasement of the male" and such debasement can be correctly termed through the usage of euphemism. Furthermore, the "faggot," the "sissy" and the "punk" are justly to be heeded as those whose compromised manhood signaled them as susceptible to white establishment manipulation that compromised their capacity to be "trusted by blacks." In effect, their emasculated status was to be heeded as warning of the traitorous infiltration into blackness by the watcher of the wall, who is Cleaver in Baldwin's formulation. If we continue to string along the implications of Baldwin's evaluation of Cleaver's concerns, in which Baldwin replaces himself with the abjected "faggot/punk/sissy," then *they* are, in Baldwin's words, those who are not to be "trusted by blacks" because they are of too much "use to the Establishment." Since we as readers are told nothing else about "faggot/punk/sissy" besides that they are "debasement of the male," it would seem that their male debasement is the substance of their racial untrustworthiness that in turn functions as a "use" value to the establishment. The "Establishment" as used here conjures comparable phrases like "the man" or "the system" which in Black Power era vernacularism connoted a web of repressive hegemonic whiteness. In other words, it is the debased black men who are voluntarily used by the white system. As Phillip Brian Harper has pointed out, the BAM/Black Power black fag was seen as one who traded his dignity, which Harper associates as steeped in the conception of black heterosexual prowess for token or temporary entrance into white systems of authority.<sup>83</sup>

Notably, unlike its centrality in Cleaver's essay, the term "homosexual" is not included as a degraded term to be equated with the likes of faggots, punks, and sissies for Baldwin. It must

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<sup>82</sup>Baldwin, *No Name*, 459.

<sup>83</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

be remembered, as Jared Sexton writes, that “Same sex desire only appears in Cleaver’s schema as a symptom of a much deeper social problem; it is not pathological in and of itself, but as a *sign* of some other disturbance- precisely a political disturbance in the order of things” (emphasis in original).<sup>84</sup> Sexton is acutely accurate in this reading of Cleaver; however, when focus is shifted to Baldwin’s reevaluation of Cleaver’s logic the discursive effects of Sexton’s formulations bubble over the edges of his conclusion and take on a new utility. For if “same sex desire” was a “sign” of “political disturbance” for Cleaver, then a multitude of political disorders became nameable via denigrating terminology associated with, but not necessarily specific to, same-sex eroticism for Baldwin. Baldwin’s issuing of homophobic language should not be understood as a comment on same-sex desire but rather an attempt to clarify Cleaver’s “confusion.” In other words, Cleaver had apparently used the wrong “sign” to mark varyingly manifested political disturbances of black men. To return to Harper, for Black Arts era writers, “homosexuality is the primary signifier” of “failed manhood.”<sup>85</sup> This is undoubtedly true in the case of Cleaver. Through a compelling reading of Harper’s seminal statement Daniel Kim concludes that failed black men were “in reality or *in effect* homosexual”(emphasis mine).<sup>86</sup> When we turn to Baldwin’s deviation, using Kim, there is a suggestion that it is the effectively homosexual faggot/punk/sissy that is the failed but not necessarily *real* homosexual and thus homosexuals in a categorical sense.

Without digressing too far into a semiotic evaluation of Kim’s language choice, it would be useful to consider exactly what it could mean to be “homosexual in effect” for the masculinist Black Arts writer. The meaning of being “homosexual in effect” and its coupling with being “homosexual in reality” has the impact of naming the two as related but distinguishable. What Kim’s distinction suggests is that varying actions and beliefs beyond the realm of the erotic could result in being signified as homosexual. Thus, the discursive signification of homosexuality as “effect” is distinguishable from homosexuality as necessarily in relationship to a “reality” of erotic behavior. Those who were *effectively* homosexual were not necessarily homosexual “in reality” but suffering from the racial emasculation stimulated by various modes of “Establishment” engagement. In this respect the formulation is tautological, as it also true that “use” to the “Establishment” might earn the labeling of “faggot/punk/sissy.” These debased males are, returning to Lee Edelman, actively submissive in their usage by the various mechanisms of the “Establishment”. Their gendered debasement is located at a cross-section of voluntary passivity and racial heresy, which is signified through euphemism.

Baldwin’s notion of deliberate “usage” by a racialized apparatus of black oppression harkens to the guiding concern of Cleaver’s aforementioned fear of the black homosexual as “the white man’s most valuable *tool* in oppressing other blacks” (emphasis mine).<sup>87</sup> An intriguing similarity to Cleaver’s black homosexual, Baldwin situates the black faggot as one necessarily involved in an interracial relationship. However, this is a similarity with a significant difference. Baldwin shifts Cleaver’s schema of specified interpersonal sexual relationship into a broader social relationship between black individuals and white systems of power. Baldwin states these tainted male “faggots” are “of too much use to the establishment to be trusted by blacks.” The

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<sup>84</sup> Sexton, “Race, Sexuality, and Political Struggle,” 33.

<sup>85</sup> Harper, *Are We Not Men*, 50.

<sup>86</sup> Daniel Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin and the Literary Politics of Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 18.

<sup>87</sup> Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 109.



implied whiteness of “the Establishment” and blackness of “faggots” suggests a set of insights comparable to those that Michelle Wallace issued of Cleaver’s schema. Namely that in Baldwin’s formulation the black faggot is a consequence of specific white male user and black male used interracial dynamic. It is the interracial dynamic of the relationship, and its necessarily unequal arrangement, that is paramount to the racial untrustworthiness of Baldwin’s faggot. Unlike Cleaver’s explicitly sexual explanation, the nature of the “Establishment’s use” of the black faggot is left ambiguous in Baldwin’s formulation.

It is the opaque nature of Baldwin’s unspecified “use” by the “Establishment” that is telling. Not only is sexuality not specified as the terms of “use” but in the context of the BAM/Black Power era the options of racially compromising interracial homosociality are bountiful. As E. Patrick Johnson and Phillip Harper argue, the black faggot can stand in for a variety of acts of racial traitorousness distinct from but approximating the political implications of homosexuality, ranging from charges of middle-class tokenism to advocacy of non-violent integrationism.<sup>88</sup> By not specifying the manifestation of use but specifying the actors (specifically as racialized and gendered subjects) and the arrangement of their relationship, Baldwin outlines the elastic framework in which the allegation of emasculated racial traitor of the black faggot could be signified in the context of BAM. What is critical is the nature of the relationship that is of use value in the interest of white hegemony and thus, necessarily, to the black subservience that determines the masculine failure of the faggot.

Baldwin’s debased faggot’s “use to the Establishment” alludes to an effeminized sexual positioning within interracial relationships. The voluntarily submissive role of “use”—for individualist investment of whatever type, erotic, political, etc.—results in the sacrifice of the racial collective and effectively reconfigures the fundamental parameters of Cleaver’s schema, thus replacing the black homosexual with the black faggot. The black faggot is one who pursues passivity and invites gendered enfeeblement in a manner that compromises his capacity for racial trustworthiness. Here Baldwin reveals a fissure between homosexuality as “reality” and the designation of black masculine failure that approximates the logic of inauthentic black homosexual; that of the “homosexual *in effect*.” In other words, it is the invited *allowance* of interracial usage that is primary to informing emasculation and that which constitutes the qualification of the faggot.

This points to a second key aspect of Baldwin’s statement that illuminates the distinction between a “faggot” “sissy” or “punk” as debasements of black manhood and the black homosexual as one who may be potentially mistaken as, but is not necessarily, a “faggot/punk/sissy.” Both Kendall Thomas’s and Cora Kaplan’s fine scholarship on Baldwin’s views on his own sexuality (which Baldwin rarely articulated candidly in published form as he regarded personal sexual affairs to be relegated to the domain of the “hidden”<sup>89</sup>) have argued that for Baldwin his “own experience has convinced him that ‘homosexual’ was not a noun but a verb.”<sup>90</sup> Sexuality was fluid and non-ontological. In the realm of his non-fiction spanning from

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<sup>88</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 58-60, Harper, *Are We Not Men*, 50-51.

<sup>89</sup> James Baldwin, “The Male Prison,” in *The Price of the Ticket: The Collected Nonfiction of James Baldwin* (New York; St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 106.

<sup>90</sup> Kendall Thomas, “Ain’t Nothing Like the Real Thing: Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality and the Jargon of Authenticity,” in *Representing Black Men*, ed. Marcellus Blount and George Cunningham (New York; Routledge, 1996), 55-73.

his 1949 essay, "Preservation of Innocence," in which he first writes explicitly about homosexuality to his much celebrated 1984 consideration of androgyny, "Here be Dragons," Baldwin rejected the notion of a sexual binary.<sup>91</sup> Baldwin stated he could "never understand" the "barriers" that sexual identification's reductive terms "homosexual" or "heterosexual necessarily imposed. Thus, comparable to his contemporary Gore Vidal, the notion of distinctly "homosexual" or "heterosexual" personhood does not register with Baldwin's notion of identity. In non-fiction and oration Baldwin struggled to find language (this fact in and of itself reveals the spectacular nature of the conundrum) to articulate same-sex disposition in relationship to, but not as, identity. Baldwin grappled with the connotative meanings of "gay" or "homosexuality" yet seems unable to secure alternative language. In a 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein, Baldwin would reflect on his difficulty with reconciling his ambivalence toward the language at his disposal:

The word gay has always rubbed me the wrong the way. I never understood exactly what is meant by it. I don't want to sound distant or patronizing because I don't really feel that. I simply feel it's a word that has very little to do with me, with where I did my growing up. I was never at home with it. I didn't have a word for it. The only one I had was "homosexual" and that quite covered whatever it was I was beginning to feel.<sup>92</sup>

Kendall Thomas submits that Baldwin taught "some of us how to be *gay* men in, and of, black America" (emphasis in original).<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Baldwin's impact upon the lives of gay identified people, particularly black people, seems rather clear and indispensable to his personal and literary legacy.

However, as Matt Brim has recently argued, this impact and the personal clarity Baldwin has provided to others did not necessarily translate to the same personal clarity for Baldwin. Brim has superbly examined "the paradox" of Baldwin as lionized pioneering voice in gay literature despite having an ambivalent position on gay identity. Most Baldwin scholars do point out that he was not actively involved in the burgeoning gay liberation movement at the time of *No Name's* publication, or at any time for that matter. This is not to imply Baldwin actively opposed those who were identifying as gay or mobilizing around such an identity. Rather, he saw sexual activity as firstly a "private matter" and as an activity not as an identity around which to mobilize.

While sexuality was not an identity for Baldwin, race and gender certainly were. Marlon Ross points out "same sex disposition is, for him, not so much identity as it is a variation within and among the bedrock of racial identity."<sup>94</sup> In *No Name in the Street* one can see his position in motion. In effect, for Baldwin erotic actions do not necessarily dictate identity, nor specifically

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<sup>91</sup> For further analysis of the specific relationship of these two essays, see Roderick Ferguson, "The Parvenu Baldwin and the Other Side of Redemption: Modernity, Race, Sexuality and the Cold War," in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>92</sup> Richard Goldstein, "Go The Way Your Blood Beats: An Interview with James Baldwin," in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, ed. Quincy Troupe (New York: Melville House Books, 2014), 59.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>94</sup> Marlon Ross, "Some Glances at the Black Fag," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 200), 505.

impact the meaning of racial identity. While the *identification* of the “faggot/punk/sissy” carries with it a male debasement that is lined with racial traitorousness, conversely a black man who engages in homosexual acts does not necessarily carry these identity traits with him. Baldwin never directly discusses the sexual orientation of “faggot/punk/sissy.” To put it rather clumsily, for Baldwin, while one may *do* homosexuality, one *is* a faggot. Cleaver’s confusion of Baldwin as a “faggot/punk/sissy” suggests that it was Baldwin’s sexuality that prompted the misidentification; yet, importantly, this implies that same-sex desire does not necessarily translate into faggotry. Baldwin’s sexuality is known by way of being opaquely named as non-faggotry, and is known with a (rickety) certainty as that which the “faggots/punks/sissys” is not. That is to say, as Baldwin tells it, Cleaver mistook him as a debasement of manhood and thus blackness because of his sexuality. That is a mistake that Baldwin can appreciate but feels indicates a misunderstanding by Cleaver of the nature of black emasculation. Yes, he may be “sexually dubious”<sup>95</sup> but, no, he is not a “faggot,” “sissy,” or “punk.” In essence Baldwin is refuting Cleaver’s assertion that the “black homosexual” yearns for whiteness by replacing that assertion with one that is more in step with the more profuse usage of homophobic epithets in key strands of Black Power/Black Arts Movement rhetoric.

Harper and Kim’s BAM era homosexual “in effect” seems translatable here into Baldwin’s *affective* faggot who *performs* gender as evidence of racial distrust, rather than one who engages in interracial homosexuality. The affective principle of performativity serves to indicate masculine debasement and thus racial distrustfulness. In Baldwin’s estimation, there is no sexual act necessary to be heard or seen by Cleaver. What the faggot does affectively is, in effect, evidence of what he *is*—a racial traitor—not what he *does* sexually. Moreover, what it is that he *does* is a matter of behavior outside of sexuality that is inspired by and results in particular notions of emasculated blackness. However, in Baldwin’s imagination what does this gender performance reveal to Cleaver? In other words, what do these affective hints of emasculation in the realm of gendered performativity divulge about the *doings* of the faggot? And how do these *doings* translate into signs of racial debasement?

Baldwin assumes Cleaver was sickened merely by the “sight and sound” of the “faggot/punk/sissy” (more on the specific importance of literal sickness later). Sight and sound are not indicated here to be associated with sexual acts but are rather tropes of behavior that draw on sexualized euphemisms to name male debasement that pivot upon the contextually developed racial tinge of masculinity. Baldwin assumes that Cleaver has the capacity to identify the faggot by way of gender performance that implies deviance from standing masculine normality. This disjuncture between emasculated performance and sexuality further disaggregates Baldwin’s BAM inspired affective black faggot from Cleaver’s pathological black homosexual.

Following the lead of, Harper, Kim in his fascinating consideration of Black Art influences on Asian American Nationalist literature has suggested that the figure of the faggot is favored signifier with a rhetorical capacity to imply a broad range of non-masculine traits.<sup>96</sup> The definitive racial traitor, rooted in a gendered failure, took on discursive elasticity in its applicability. The “faggot,” “sissy,” and “punk” reject their place on the black side of “the wall” through the “debasement of manhood,” a notion that does not hold a strict one-to-one relationship with sexual acts but rather varying acts that can be labeled via homophobic language. The implications for Baldwin are that black heterosexuality is subject to debasing

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<sup>95</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 459.

<sup>96</sup> Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow*, 16-22.

faggotry and that a black homosexual can potentially retain black masculinity. This, like the logic it seeks refuge in, is an unsteady terrain on which to find an ideological foothold. Baldwin seeks to massage the terms of entrance into authentic black manhood as defined by the prevailing ethos of Black Arts identity politics. Thus he, like they, must define himself as distinguishable from the failed black man in order to make his manhood clear.

### **Conclusions: Sleeping with the Enemy**

Baldwin engaged in conversation with leading Black Arts poet Nikki Giovanni that provides a hint to the utility of an emasculated counter-weight to genuine masculinity. The conversation was published as *James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni: A Dialogue* less than a year after the publication of *No Name in the Street*. In this published discussion Baldwin states “straight cats invent faggots so they can sleep with them without being faggots themselves.”<sup>97</sup> The quote is oddly situated in the broader dialogue; it is not directly addressed in Giovanni’s response, nor is the topic revisited in the rest of the recorded conversation. However, in the context of considering the function of Baldwin’s rhetoric in *No Name* this quote is revealing in a number of ways, particularly the significance of invented counter-identity.

In Baldwin’s formulation “straight cats” that “invent faggots” could remain straight despite “sleeping” with “faggots.” More specifically, it is the invented nature of the faggot that protects the straight inventor from rendering himself a faggot, despite a sexual appetite that should ostensibly compromise his manhood. The difference is not the sexual act, which is shared in this formulation, but rather the discursive designation and implications of what one’s role in the act denotes. This may be read as an indirect response aimed at Cleaver and a suggestion that his homophobia is rooted in desire. And perhaps it is; and perhaps for Cleaver, it was. However, it is important to reiterate that Cleaver never uses the term “faggot” in his attack on Baldwin. Clearly in *No Name*, Baldwin does. Moreover, he does so in a manner more similar to scores of BAM writers who had been, by the publication of *No Name*, for years deploying the term as a means of articulating compromised masculinity that poses a threat of black masculinity and solidarity. In this respect Baldwin, in the vein of the statement he makes to Giovanni, “invents faggots” in *No Name* as distinguishable figures of black emasculation which would allow him to obtain a “straight” masculinism despite his own same-sex experiences and desire. However, Baldwin does not “invent faggots,” or sissies and punks for that matter, *in order* to sleep with them but rather as a means of distinguishing himself from them under the designation of homosexuality, which sleeping “with them” would likely suppose.

Returning this formulation to *No Name*, the space between a gay black man and emasculated black faggot is expanded in Baldwin’s rumination on the circumstances surrounding the incarceration of his friend, Tony Maynard. Baldwin’s devastating story of Tony Maynard’s racist detainment and wrongful imprisonment serves as the loose narrative arch of *No Name* that bridges the National Politic to the brutal realities of the politics of the ground. Using the individual as an emotive map of broader socio-political terrain Maynard’s story stands as a narrative epicenter from which Baldwin extends consideration of black political prisoners, the

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<sup>97</sup> James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Lippincott 1973), 89.

criminalization of black sexuality, white homosexual panic and, finally, Baldwin's own role as victim, witness, and intermediary to it all.<sup>98</sup>

Maynard was by this time in their relationship Baldwin's estranged friend, driver, and bodyguard. In the narrative of the essay, Maynard individuality is always shadowed by the prospective doom of the ascriptions his race and gender bequeath.<sup>99</sup> Baldwin narrates Maynard's particular plight as potentially around the corner from every black man. In short, Maynard's story is that of a series of unjust legal and police actions that pile onto his psyche and physically restrict self-determination. I would like to isolate a specific moment in Baldwin's discussion of Maynard as it relates to the lines of reasoning explained in his conversation with Nikki Giovanni and his response to Cleaver.

According to Baldwin's relaying of Maynard's account, his initial arrest was the result of an incident with a number of on-leave uniformed sailors who were strolling the city streets late one evening. According to the sailors' testimony and the conclusions of the police investigation, Maynard sexually propositioned a sailor and, following the rejection of his advances, this exchange escalated into a physical confrontation. However, Baldwin has doubts about this version of events. He recalls Maynard telling him from behind bars, "'Since when have I ever talked' his face convulsed as though he were vomiting 'to punks like that.'" <sup>100</sup> It is the usage of the qualifying term "punks *like that*" which interests me. Between Baldwin's public life and the fact that he is a long-standing close friend of Maynard it is fair to assume that Maynard knows he is talking to a gay man (again, this phrasing "gay man" is a retroactive projection of identity that Baldwin actively rejected). Moreover, a gay man whom Maynard knows can corroborate his history of not associating with "punks." Thus, clearly, Maynard is not talking to a "punk"; and more to the point, not a "punk *like that*." These "punks," hiding behind a shroud of patriotic uniformity are responsible for Maynard's imprisoned state. Conversely, Baldwin is responsible for the task of freeing him. The "punk like that" and his capacity to trap an innocent black man is contrasted with Baldwin, who is masculinized and blackened by Maynard's recognition of him as trustworthy and capable of ensuring his freedom. Baldwin's suspicious status as one who may be, in his own words, of "use by the Establishment" is appropriated by a clandestine exploitation of his status to secure liberation for the Establishment's primary victim, an incarcerated black male.<sup>101</sup> Yes, Baldwin's self-described sexual dubiousness marks a degree confirmation of

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<sup>98</sup> While *No Name* focuses on domestic racial tensions, ironically Maynard's arrest occurs in Germany and the essay itself is written while Baldwin resides in Turkey. The significance of Baldwin writing about America from Turkey is explored at length by Magdalena Zaborowska in her aforementioned impressive book, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin Demott and to a lesser extent Yoshinobu Hakutani, each analogize Maynard to Bigger Thomas in a manner which reproduces Baldwin's fundamental critique of *Native Son* as portraying Thomas as socially made fear, one without independent subjectivity. Each scholar notes that Maynard is not a fully developed figure in the essay and serves more an individuated mode by which to chart American racism.

<sup>100</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 417.

<sup>101</sup> It is no small matter that both Maynard and Cleaver are both incarcerated. Prison presents a context where conceptions of gender and sexuality, and rhetoric regarding male gender and sexuality, are impacted. Some useful scholarship on prisons and intersections of race, sexuality and rhetoric include Tavia Nyong'o "Punk'd Theory," *Social Text* 23.3-4 (2005): 19-34; Lee Bernstein *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill:

Cleaver's concern regarding the use of the emasculated by systems of white supremacy. However, the interracial trust indebted to his supposed stunted black sexuality enables Baldwin to appear to be of "use" while in fact acting as an undercover agent advocating for a black man's liberty.

It is no small matter that both Cleaver, at the time he wrote *Soul on Ice*, and Maynard at the time that Baldwin published *No Name* are incarcerated. While comprehensive consideration of prison as the orienting theme of *No Name* is beyond the scope of this essay the topic has significant ramifications on both Cleaver and Baldwin's conception of masculinity and merits sustained mention. *No Name* was published at a time when prison figured as a critical site, both literally and figuratively, for black radical thought. In the formative silhouette of Malcolm X, canonical Black Power thinkers like Cleaver, Eldridge Knight, Assata Shakur and famously linked intellectuals Angela Davis and George Jackson each, in Dan Berger's words, "made sense of freedom from positions of confinement."<sup>102</sup> In step with Lee Bernstein's conclusion regarding the "Prison Arts Movement," Berger notes that literal incarceration was deployed as "strategic metaphor" to articulate the continual state of black American oppression among the ostensibly "free."<sup>103</sup> Fatefully, the expressly repressive nature of prison was staged as a condition that might free one's mind to fully recognize that, in fact, as Zayd Shakur declared, "America is the prison."

In step with the long history of lionized "outlaw" or "bad man" figures, Bernstein suggests imprisonment lent an authenticating authority to black writers during the Black Power/Arts era. Such intellectuals offered front-line testimonials as victims of, and insurgent resisters to, racial subjugation at its most explicit. Moreover, writing from, or after spending time behind bars, served to defuse potential disconnectedness from a folk audience who might feel alienated from assumedly elitist literature. In this respect, Baldwin's popularity among literati and liberals hindered particular claims to racial and masculine authenticity to which Eldridge Cleaver, in no small part due to his notorious explanation of his criminality, was able to stake a strong claim. The status of the "outlaw" as testifying signifier to the lawlessness of the law and the complex ways that masculinity is impacted by incarceration met head-on in Cleaver's attack and Baldwin's response.

Quentin Miller's *A Criminal Power: James Baldwin and the Law* explores incarceration as a continual, indeed central, subject throughout Baldwin's career from *Notes of a Native Son* onward. As Miller shows, Baldwin's engagement with the topic of prison on the page and as an activist reached its zenith in the late 60's and early 70's. Baldwin's deep concern with the plight of prisoners manifested in a range of ways including extensive support for Maynard, support of the Black Panthers position on incarceration and jury trials, and penning an open letter of support for Angela Davis. If incarceration was the literal repressive arm of the state, it also functioned as literary motif to interrogate the causes and fallouts of repressed sexuality. Melinda Plastas and Eve Allegra Ramon show that across this period Baldwin utilized prison as a consistent "vehicle for contemplating sexual alterity..."<sup>104</sup> Indeed, as they and scholars like Lynn, Mills and Rolland

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University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Russell Robinson, "Masculinity as Prison: Sexual Identity, Race and Incarceration," *California Law Review* 99 (2011): 1309-1408.

<sup>102</sup>Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*. (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>104</sup> Plastas, Melinda & Ramon, Eve Allegra, "Brutality and Brotherhood: James Baldwin and Prison Sexuality," *African American Review*, Vol. 46: 4, 2013. 687.

Murray explore, prison also plays a key role in familial dynamics and gendered development of characters in both of his Black Power era novels, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* and in the direction of the play *Fortune and Men's Eyes*. In each of these texts Baldwin disrupts prevalent assumption that prisons are exclusively realms of coerced homoeroticism and homosociality. Baldwin utilized prison, both literally and figuratively, to pursue the transgressive potential of mutual desire and masculine vulnerability.

While Baldwin most expressly considered prison in the late 1960's and early 1970's imprisonment was a longstanding paradigm for describing the limitations of masculinity and offering a counterintuitive space to potentially reconstitute the social constrictions of masculinity. Baldwin, more than a decade earlier, critiqued what he deemed "the prison of masculinity." Baldwin, largely through a revocation of Andre Gide's contentions about homosexuality and "nature of masculinity," argued that social meanings of masculinity, and indeed its assumed "naturalness," limited male emotional experience and often manifested as violent projections of swelling angst and despair. In short, Baldwin revoked the notion of any "natural" masculinity and thus suppositions of homosexuality as antithetical to masculinity. Gide's reasoning was indicative of a prevailing defensive insecurity that fortifies masculinity, protecting it from supposed denigration. However, for Baldwin such insistent overcompensation only thinly veiled the prospective alternative meanings of masculinity that embrace, rather than despise, ambivalence. Baldwin understood all too well that such liberatory prospects, particularly those that required the critical reflection of psychosexual selfhood, inspired almost reflexive defensiveness. In *No Name* Baldwin writes, anticipating Reid-Pharr's language, "that the scapegoat pays for the sins of others is well known, but this is the legend, and a revealing one at that. In fact, however, the scapegoat may be made to suffer his suffering cannot purify the sinner; it merely incriminated him more and seals his damnation."<sup>105</sup> When considered in the context of his broader concern for black prisoners, Baldwin has keen awareness of why, and how attacks on "normative" manhood engender reactionary hyper masculinity expressed through staunch revocations of homosexuality. Moreover, Baldwin's use of "their" language of gendered and sexualized denigration suggests he may have been adopting and ventriloquizing Cleaver's language in order to appeal to him on his terms. What can be understood as a concession to Cleaver may rather be Baldwin's patient deliberation of man's warped logic.

More than decade after the publication of *No Name* Baldwin reflected on, perhaps *admitted* to, his attempt to "undo the damage" of the attacks of Cleaver. It would seem, at least in the realm of scholarship, that time has undone a great deal of the damage that Cleaver inflicted on Baldwin's reputation in the late 60's. However, that a gay black man, which is how History has come to identify James Baldwin, despite his various contestations, could escape the label of "faggot" in the context of those engaged in such practices of rhetorical designation was unlikely. The swell of attacks on Baldwin by seminal Black Power/Arts thinkers is proof of this. While heterosexuality did not necessarily absolve one from the rhetorical wrath of homophobic epithets to be gay seemingly guaranteed such discursive targeting. That is to say that Baldwin's rhetorical move, his attempt to carve a space for the black homosexual within the fraternity of masculinism could not foster the outcome he desired. However, it has not been Baldwin's achievement that has ultimately been of interest to me. Rather, it is the prospect of hypothetical tenability in Baldwin's rhetorical move that is usefully illustrative. What this particular reading of *No Name*

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<sup>105</sup> Baldwin, *No Name*, 386.

allots is a concentrated site of rhetorical discourse in which homophobic epithets are revealed to be elastic in their application as emasculating signifiers. The counter-intuitive nature of a gay man using homophobic rhetoric reveals the central objective to be emasculation and racial defaming; the “faggot” or comparable terming being the primary signifier and the figure of the compromised homosexual its referent.

The complexities of Baldwin’s sexuality, as well as his own conceptualizations of sexuality, have been feature topics of scholars across disciplines. This, of course, is not without good reason. Baldwin, a self-proclaimed “sexually dubious” figure, was painfully aware that many people wrestled, often clumsily and at times generatively, with the complexity of his identity. As Dwight McBride aptly notes, “Baldwin himself knew all too well the pitfalls of being at the margins of many identities that were thought to be exclusive (gay, black and American, for example).”<sup>106</sup> As evidenced in McBride’s edited collection, *James Baldwin Now* as well as the indispensable collection *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, Baldwin as: black, gay, American, author, activist, etc. has served as an essential figure in theorizing alterities of presumed rigidity of these very concepts. Indeed, as McBride, and scores of formative cultural studies and queer theory scholars have explored, the fact that Baldwin is all of the things has helped reconfigure the assumptions regarding their limitations and possibilities. And still, as Woubshet has pointed out, otherwise impressive works like the recent Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* continue to “remain oddly silent on the role of sexuality of Baldwin’s work and life.”<sup>107</sup> As such, studies of his sexuality, particularly the implications of his sexuality in the midst of the Civil Rights era, remain pertinent. If Baldwin’s sexuality was always, and in some spaces still is, a source of contention then the Black Power/Black Arts era, and the words of Eldridge Cleaver, are flashpoints of that still unfolding narrative.

What this particular reading of *No Name* allots is a concentrated site of rhetorical discourse and ideology in which homophobic epithets are revealed to be elastic in their application as emasculating signifiers. What begins to take shape in Baldwin’s curious rhetoric is what Douglas Taylor has called the “semiotic grid” of interrelational identity within the Black Arts era. The counter-intuitive nature of a gay man using homophobic rhetoric reveals the central objective to be emasculation and racial defaming; the “faggot” or comparable terming being the primary signifier and the homosexual its referent. And, as the next chapter will examine, the terms of interrelation only grow as the black faggot is measured by proximity to whiteness as the racialized sign of emasculation.

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<sup>106</sup> Dwight McBride, ed. *James Baldwin Now*, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>107</sup> Woubshet, Dagmawi, “Review: The imperfect Power of *I Am Not Your Negro*,” *The Atlantic* February 8, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/i-am-not-your-negro-review/515976/>



## Chapter 2

### Trying to Grow a Beard: Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, Interracial Sex and the Latent Threat of the "Uncle Tom"

#### Black Men, Negro Males and The Sexual Life of the Uncle Tom

Eldridge Cleaver's public literary assaults on James Baldwin are the Black Arts/Black Power era's most notorious. Unfortunately, Cleaver was not alone; rather, "Notes on a Native Son" was the apex of a trend among scores of commentators. Henry Louis Gates notes that for Black Power/Black Arts pundits, "By the late sixties, Baldwin-bashing was almost a rite of initiation."<sup>1</sup> Such bashing was equally a form of personal purging of association from the politics Baldwin was meant to exemplify. Baldwin, who certainly did have the ear of white Americans by the early 1960s, was understood to embody *the* literary voice of passé political pleas to white America's conscience. The authorial voice of Civil Rights Movement's ethos, Baldwin whined where he should have demanded and schmoozed with those of intelligentsia and government when he should have been politically staunch and socially aloof. In many instances, it seemed that Black Arts/Black Power pledges renounced that which Baldwin stood for as a pre-condition of entry into an authentic Nationalist fold.

As the previous chapter should have made clear, it is certainly true that Baldwin's racial allegiance was questioned due, in great part, to his sexual orientation. However, while *his* "racial death wish"<sup>2</sup> may have been understood as generated by his sexuality, Baldwin's masculine failure was socially intelligible via his public politics. Ideologues like Cleaver maintained that Baldwin's moral appeals for civic accesses were evidence of his yearning for whiteness and repudiation of blackness. That is to say, Baldwin's gayness was a private faggotry made publically legible through his status as an "Uncle Tom." In Cleaver's words, as only he could put it, Baldwin "bent over for the white man."<sup>3</sup> This quote could be read at least two ways: as a literal denunciation of Baldwin's sexual practices with white men or as an allusion to his submissive social and political relationships with white authority. It should be read as both; for Cleaver, they were deeply intertwined. Baldwin's racially deviant sexuality and traitorous political and social orientation leaned upon each other, enforcing and propping the other to produce a dynamic failed black male. To speak plainly, Baldwin bespoke the "fact" that a faggot was an Uncle Tom and an Uncle Tom was a faggot. For each labeling, black faggot and Uncle Tom, meaning is in part a consequence of the importation of the meaning of the other, producing a concentric site of indexical disavowals of failed black masculinity.

In the early 1960s Greenwich Village, the Beat Generation's Amiri Baraka (at the time still known as Leroi Jones) emerged as a preeminent voice of black literature and cultural politics. Baraka's embrace of radical Nationalist identity was buttressed by manning the front lines of rhetorical Baldwin bashing. Baraka notoriously coined Baldwin a "Joan of Arc of the cocktail party"; a faux male who acted as a token racial pacifier in the context of liberal opulence.<sup>4</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Fire Last Time" *The New Republic*, last modified August 2, 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/114134/henry-louis-gates-james-baldwin-fire-last-time>.

<sup>2</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), 100.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>4</sup> Amiri Baraka, "brief reflections on two hot shots," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Akashic Books, 2009), 138.

Baraka's estimation, Baldwin's protests were but an effeminized "shriek" of "white middle class society" from one who was not "a *real* black man" (emphasis in original) and one who would not protest if "turned white."<sup>5</sup> As Baraka's biographers are quick, and right, to point out, Baraka's numerous attacks on Baldwin reflected a personal anxiousness to dissociate himself from the white and often queer intellectual bohemian vanguard with which he personally and professionally associated throughout the 1950s. Baldwin slander was a handy aid in transmuted from downtown Beat Leroi Jones to uptown Nationalist Amiri Baraka. At this stage in the dissertation the substance of Baldwin's characterization as racial traitor, specifically in service of Baraka's Nationalist transition, serves as a provisional gateway to consider the intraracial threat of the acculturated Negro assimilationist to the fraternal tropes of black masculinity. This figure, often termed the "Uncle Tom," will be explored as a composite figure that Baraka formulated at the symbiotic intersection of the following Black Arts tropes: the racially deluded black faggot, the emasculated decadent white male, and the white female as embodied conduit to white patriarchy.

Within the late Bohemian and Nationalist works of Baraka's literary canon, Baldwin is but a specific target of a much broader cohort of intimate antagonists—those racially traitorous Negro males who compromised their essential black manhood in the interest of adopting a white middle class ethos. As I note in the Introduction I use both of these terms, *Negro* and *male*, advisedly as each signifies a state of racial and gendered lack in relationship to the fully realized character of a black man. This segment of sexually compromised and thus racially traitorous and thus "outsiders within" functioned as intraracial homosocial buffers between authentic black masculinity and the effeminized white male. Baraka's late bohemian and Black Nationalist works are saturated with suspicion regarding the authentic blackness of those ostensibly black men who were in "fact" deluded and self-loathing Negro males. While racial identity was the ultimate question, it was a discourse of masculinity that mediated and made legible one's compliance or disobedience to *real* blackness. For Baraka, black masculinity and emasculated whiteness served as the primary referents from which the black masculinity or Negro maleness of a suspected Uncle Tom was gauged, assessed, and defined.

Cursory evaluations of Baraka's Nationalist period have often been too quick to deem him an unequivocal racial essentialist. As scholar Nita Kumar points out, Baraka's conception of blackness often poses as essentialist and inherently self-defining.<sup>6</sup> However, Baraka just as often explains blackness as an unguaranteed, aspirational, and idealized state of conscious being. In this respect, phenotype, embodiment, and African ancestry, while necessary, was not sufficient to, in Algernon Austin's parlance, *achieve* blackness.<sup>7</sup> In the words of Waldo Martin, Black Power era definitions of racial ontology, which Baraka greatly shaped, walked an uneasy line between active verb, "a racial choice or what one does," and that of an adjective describing an immutable

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<sup>5</sup> Baraka, "brief reflection," 140-141.

<sup>6</sup> Nita Kumar, "The Logic of Retribution in Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*," *African American Review* 37.2/3 (Autumn 2003): 271-279.

<sup>7</sup> Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (New York University Press, 2006).

‘natural essence, a racial “soul.”’<sup>8</sup> In effect, blackness existed at a perturbed intersection of essentialism and socio-political orientation. Again, returning to Martin’s distinction, this made all the difference in the Black Nationalist context between one who may be black in appearance and origin, but not be *real* black, in cultural orientation. Blackness slides back and forth between a trope of social identity and one of biological fact. In my estimation, for Baraka blackness should be regarded as a *process* of socially catalyzed *return* to fact, a psychological passage through infringing western/white pathology to a natural state of being; a return “Home” to a metaphysical state of black being.<sup>9</sup> The almost bifurcated branches of this reasoning make for a type of chaotic and *almost* irreconcilable logic in which, like the Sartrean understanding of Negritude, one must learn to *be* what one fundamentally *is*.<sup>10</sup>

To return to Paul Gilroy’s formulation that “gender is the modality by which race is lived,” gender, namely “manhood,” was the principal modality by which Baraka conceived of blackness as an achieved or failed state of being. It was the achievement of masculine becoming or the failure of emasculated abjection that gauged the ultimate condition of racial (in)authenticity. In this respect Baraka was chief intellectual architect of the Black Power era intraracial homosocial dualism. Baraka posited Black and Negro in a state of, to adapt phrasing from Albert Murray, “antagonistic cooperation,”<sup>11</sup> where concentric qualification, phenotype, and ancestry are fundamentally disrupted by their antithetical relationships to racial authenticity. That is to say, it is the nature of black and Negro racial sameness that spurs the qualities of their racial difference. In the idiom of E. Patrick Johnson, it was the necessity of disavowed definitions of failed blackness that counter balanced the articulation of the meaning of avowed authentic blackness.<sup>12</sup> References to Negro male failure were necessary to stabilize the terms of black masculinity as achieved; these oppositional positionalities were mutually constitutive by way of their combative relationship. For Baraka, the racial and masculine angst of the Uncle Tom figure signified black masculine failure par excellence and functioned as Baraka’s principle intraracial foil.

Riche Richardson’s fine work *Black Masculinity and the U.S South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* considers the role of national geography in representations of intraracial black male otherness and focuses upon the construction and deployment of the Uncle Tom figure in the discourse of Black Masculinity. Richardson describes the archetypal Uncle Tom as a figure emerging out of intransigent nostalgia for the antebellum south whom, “epitomized an innocuous, and neutered model of black masculine sexuality and came to be signified primarily

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<sup>8</sup> Waldo Martin, “Be Real Black for Me: Representation, Authenticity, and the Cultural Politics of Black Power,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present & Future*, ed. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Meally (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 254.

<sup>9</sup> *Home: Social Essays* functions as the central source of Baraka’s embracement of Black Nationalist thought. Blackness as a metaphysical state in “Home” for Baraka and the essays trace his ascent to this home.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Paul Sartre and John Macombie, “Black Orpheus,” *The Massachusetts Review* 6.1 (1964): 13-52.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (New York: Vintage Press, 1996), 39.

<sup>12</sup> This formulation is the guiding theoretical paradigm of Johnson’s key text, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*.

in relation to an aged, black masculine body."<sup>13</sup> Richardson correctly defines the Uncle Tom not as a literal subject but as a floating discursive signifier of menacing blackness that is neutralized primarily through psychic sterilization of supposed hyper-masculinity. However, while the Uncle Tom figure has its roots in the South "he," like unprecedented numbers of African Americans, migrated and adapted to new spatial contexts in the Urban North.<sup>14</sup> As Richardson points out, the Northern urban experience emerged as the landscape of "real" black male rite of passage, while the South was a geographic site of temporal black male languishing.

Richardson's contribution to the geographic dimension to productions of black masculinity has particular pertinence when considering the interplay of race and gender in the transition from Civil Rights to Black Power. Despite the profound efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, and its variant ideological strands, its participants became categorical in their role as focal targets of Black Nationalist accusations of "Tomming." William Van DeBurg states that the Civil Rights "Uncle Tom" was understood by Black Power advocates to have suffered from the "internalization of majoritarian values" and participants had "strayed from folk roots" into the realm of "cultural dislocation."<sup>15</sup> The Uncle Tom approximated "whiteness" at its most unadulterated via embodied expressions of its most pronounced and exaggerated bourgeois traits. While the Uncle Tom was "re-cast" in Black Power/Black Arts era discourse, "he" maintained the fundamental trait of tamed sexuality as proof that his blackness had been curbed by efforts to acculturate. Indeed, Uncle Tom was a derogatory appellation directed specifically at *Negro males*. As already noted "Negro Male" signifies a state of racial and gendered lack in relationship to the fully realized character of a *black man* and focuses racial failure as primarily male problem. In this respect Uncle Tom is first and foremost a relational term. It is a term by which meaning is activated as a disavowed counterpoint to the accomplished subject to which it is necessarily compared. For if, to return to Cheryl Clarke, "blackness structured manhood and manhood became the desired end of blackness,"<sup>16</sup> the inverse was that "Negroness" was structured by emasculation and the emasculation was the fatal end of "Negroness." In other words, the desire of the Uncle Tom for racial transformation was precipitated by and/or resulted in emasculative characteristics.

A survey of Black Power/Black Arts era Uncle Tom figures whose masculinity and racial purity has been neutralized due to voluntary, or at least unconscious, submission to debasing acculturation would be revealing simply in its capaciousness. However, I am concerned not with volume but with interrogating the terms of the inter-play of race, sexuality, and gender within the concentrated typification of the Black Arts era Uncle Tom. Returning to Baraka, biographer Jerry Watts accurately suggests that he often dealt in what Max Weber calls "ideal types," fictional composites of typifications that wholly embody the most unadulterated version of their

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<sup>13</sup> Richie Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Richardson focuses on how the American South remains a primary referent of black masculine compromise and obedience.

<sup>15</sup> William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca: Women Poets of the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 18.

design.<sup>17</sup> This chapter engages the Uncle Tom's gendered failure via a deconstruction of *the* Uncle Tom of the Black Arts era. I will consider the malleable and doomed protagonist, Clay, of the famed text *Dutchman* as a fictive embodiment of discourses of sexuality, political identity, and racial identification. Clay emerged as the blueprint for Black Arts renderings of black masculine internal angst and serve as the period's most cited fictive male figure of embodied Manichean delirium. This chapter takes a single work, and most explicitly a single character, as a means of grounding an exploration of a wider set of ideological currents of race, gender, and sexuality as conceptualized by period's most impactful literary ideologue. Methodologically rooted at the cross section of Cultural Studies and Literary theory, I regard *Dutchman* as both a constitutive agent of Black Power Masculinist ideology and as an illustrative artifact useful in mapping the counters of Black Power Masculinist ideology.

Taking as the archetypal fictive Uncle Tom of the Black Arts era I use Clay to interrogate the volatile fault line of authentic black manhood that teeters within Baraka's paradigm. Clay embodies the struggle between an essential black masculinity and an emasculated white faggotry. Clay's class, education, and passivity serve as critiques of Civil Rights Movement era politics understood as yearnings for acculturation into middle class, white socio-economic realms of respectability. Furthermore, these characteristics of "Uncle Tomism" or Negroness are understood as emasculated and estranged from blackness due to voluntary submission to white institutional and pathological authority. It will be shown that the perceived failures of middle class, white male masculinity served as a discursive conduit between the meaning of the figures Uncle Tom and the Black Faggot.

Furthermore, Clay's unsteady racial and masculine status is induced by the play's temptress, Lula. Lula, a provocative white female with a purse full of forbidden apples, operates as an emblematic conduit to white male systemic power that Clay yearns to embrace and enter, both figuratively and sexually. Clay's yearning for interracial sex, a prospect dangled before him by Lula's baiting, paradoxically signals a tempting inauguration into the faggotry of white middle class manhood. In line with the argument crafted in the previous chapter this homophobic term does not share a one-to-one relationship to homosexuality within the discursive articulation of Black Power Masculinist logic of Baraka. The term "Faggot" was regularly utilized by Baraka to explain white maleness as caught within an undertow of its own emasculative social structures. Thus it will be shown that the Uncle Tom figure of Clay threatens to *become* a "faggot" in his attempt to personify an assumed normative maleness, the domain of whiteness, through interracial heterosexual sex. It is necessary to note that Lula has vastly different motives than Clay. Lula wishes to draw Clay's assumed unadulterated, and thus dangerous, blackness/masculinity out from under his racially counterfeited state in an effort to kill him with the justification that he, as ravenous black man, threatened her as chaste white woman, and thus the patriarchal authority of white men. Exactly how successful Lula is in her efforts and the quality of Clay's ultimate racial and masculine status at the play's conclusion will serve as the concluding section of the chapter.

### **Coming Out Party: The Emergence of the *Dutchman* and Baraka as Black Arts Leader**

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<sup>17</sup> Jerry Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 83. See also Tom Reck, "Archetypes in *Dutchman*," *Studies in Black Literature*, 1.1 (Spring 1970): 66-81.

In summary, *Dutchman* is a one-act play that centers on the ostensibly chance meeting of a coy 20-year-old, middle-class “negro” named Clay and a brazen 30-year-old, bohemian white woman named Lula in a New York City subway car. Clay, who is already seated, notices Lula standing on the subway platform through a window and the two exchange playful and suggestive glances. Upon entering the train Lula initiates a flirtatious liaison with the more inert yet clearly enticed Clay. The bulk of the play centers nearly exclusively on the pair’s intimate dialogue. The majority of the interaction features Lula as the social aggressor who, drifting between fits of hysteria and poised aloofness, psychoanalyzes the “well known type” Clay, critiquing his appearance and affect as well as prophesying the events of their evening together. While Clay is unnerved by Lula’s brashness and accurate assessments of his character, he allows the bizarre encounter to progress in the interest of prospective sexual gratification. Ultimately, in response to Lula’s most frenzied tirade, in which her attacks on Clay’s racial and masculine lack reach a zenith, Clay responds by delivering a monologue that announces his rage and yearning for vengeance on her and white people at large, which he has apparently kept veiled to that point. With Clay’s “true” self uncloaked Lula stabs him to death and directs the other passengers, who have remained largely idle observers to this point, to toss his body off the train. Finally, the play concludes with the train car now cleared except for one black male passenger whom Lula approaches, presumably to seduce and ultimately murder.

Premiering in May 1964, the play earned the coveted Obie Award, which honors the best off-Broadway play of the year. The reviews, if not always sterling, spoke of the work as politically relevant and noteworthy of the emergence of Baraka as a “shocking” and “furious” artistic voice. Just as Baraka emerged as a prominent literary presence in the estimation of those critical mediums whose validation meant a great deal professionally, his increasingly candid Black Nationalist impulses which compelled the play’s contentious vibrancy tugged him to stage right of the Greenwich Village Bohemian scene and to center stage of a Black literary renaissance on the cusp.

Farah Griffin’s labeling of Amiri Baraka as the “father of the Black Arts Movement” summarizes the general scholarly understanding of his status. In the words of Brian Phillip Harper, Amiri Baraka “can certainly be seen as the founder of the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s.”<sup>18</sup> Specifically, *Dutchman* is, according to the likes of Baraka biographer Jerry Watts, Baraka anthologist William Harris, and theorist of black cultural identity Michele Wright, the most definitive work of ‘60s Black literature.<sup>19</sup> Scholars have generally situated the play as the representative paradigm of Black Arts Movement themes of direct and redemptive reprisals against white racism. For instance, Nilgun Anadolu-Okur’s Afrocentrist-oriented literary analysis of BAM states that *Dutchman* “initiated the movement” and amplified the brand of

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<sup>18</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 40-41. However, it should be noted that fine scholarship by the likes of James Smethurst, Sonia Sanchez, John Bracey Jr., Margo Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins emphasize the national scope and collective nature of Black Arts participation in a manner which troubles Baraka status as lionized designer of BAM.

<sup>19</sup> See Watts, *Amiri Baraka*; William Harris’s introduction to *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991); and Michelle Wright’s discussion of *Dutchman* found in Chapter 3, “Some Women Disappear: Frantz Fanon’s Legacy in Black Nationalist Thought and the Black (male) Subject” in *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

“black consciousness” that would be the ideological partner of the arts.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the apostle-like position that Baraka has assumed in reflective scholarship is predicated greatly by the lionization of BAM contemporaries. Baraka was largely held to be the most influential artist and theorist of the aesthetic and political ambitions of the Black Arts Movement by his contemporaries. In fact it was influential BAM poet in his own right Haki Madhubti (formerly Don E. Lee) who first called Baraka the Black Arts Movement’s “acknowledged father.”<sup>21</sup> Moreover, *Dutchman* held specific significance as the work of Black Arts genesis. Co-author and editor of *Black Fire* and key Black Arts participant Larry Neal names Black theatre “the theatre of Leroi Jones,” and cited *Dutchman* as his work to represent the accomplishment of Black theatre under the umbrella of Black Arts aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Baraka himself in his seminal short essay “The Revolutionary Theatre” names *Dutchman* as representative of the critical objectives of Black Arts.<sup>23</sup>

If Baraka is in fact the “father of the Black Arts Movement,” the implications of such paternity extend beyond the fathering of aesthetics and into the realm of the ideological and political. As noted, BAM functioned as a type of poetic and rhetorical voice box of Black Nationalist politics of the time. BAM was an arts and letters movement in which aesthetic was intended to be nearly inseparable from message. Cultural productions were politically prescriptive; black art required an ascription to Black Nationalist politics (even if such interpretations sometimes varied). As discussed in my Introduction and as scholars like David L. Smith have emphasized, Baraka’s Black Arts work was guided by his shifting politics. In turn his personal transformation impacted the terms of black literatures political function in the 1960’s.<sup>24</sup> In the words of William Van Deburg, for Baraka, “Social and aesthetic values were inextricably wedded.”<sup>25</sup> The role of Baraka as a Nationalist theorist is imperative in understanding the significance of his fiction—*Dutchman* especially. Baraka not only shaped Black Arts aesthetics but also theorizations of blackness that governed the propagandistic terms of Black Art as a catalyst for promoting a psychological state of Nationalist citizenship. The interplay of blackness and masculinity in *Dutchman* can be understood via the paradigmatic context of Baraka’s theorizations of the relationship between race, gender, and sexuality articulated in the polemical nonfiction essays of his Black Nationalist stage.

I take my critical cue from Baraka’s (at the time Jones’s) own evaluation of the play in his 1964 essay, “Leroi Jones Talking.”<sup>26</sup> William Harris in his theorization of Baraka’s aesthetic

<sup>20</sup> Nilgun Anadolu-Oku, *Contemporary African American Theater: Afrocentricity in the Works of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka and Charles Fuller* (New York; Routledge, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> William Harris, “Introduction”, *The Leroi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991), xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Black Aesthetic* ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Double Day, 1972), 264.

<sup>23</sup> Baraka, “The Revolutionary Theatre,” *Home: Social Essays*, 237.

<sup>24</sup> See David L. Smith, “Amiri Baraka the Black Arts of Black Arts,” *boundary 2* 15 (Autumn 1986): 235-254.

<sup>25</sup> Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 177.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that Baraka’s explanation of the *true* meaning of the play was far from consistent. For instance, Baraka would fundamentally reject his own 1964 explanation in 1984 by saying that the play could have been “about a man or a women.” Indeed, revealing the “actual” meaning of the play for Baraka is of little interest to me. Rather, this specific

trajectory situates this essay as exemplifying a transitional period in which Baraka was preoccupied with rejecting literary modernism as a viable means for theoretically orienting black literature. In the essay, Baraka chastises what he deems the hollow aesthetic and apolitical ambitions of American literature. Furthermore, he explores the limitations of writing as and about black people within the context of these national (i.e. white) literary standards/values. Specifically, Baraka is responding to the cascade of critical responses to the recently debuted *Dutchman*. Baraka takes issue with a trend of reviewer's insistent speculation over who/what Clay and Lula "represent" and thus what the political or emotional implications of their symbolic relationship are. Baraka rebukes any symbolism as inappropriate to his characters; they are in his words rather "real people."<sup>27</sup> At this stage in his life Baraka's resistance is a consequence of his emerging disdain for what he deems the abstract and self-indulgent nature of "western" art, particularly literature. Baraka defies assigning any symbolic value to the play's characters or the plot's meaning as he deems notions of symbolism and representation as aesthetic methods that perpetuate art as disconnected from lived reality.

Baraka would make clear in numerous essays, most famously his BAM statement of purpose "The Revolutionary Theatre," that Western art's preoccupations with symbolism reflected broader societal and psychological implications about white people's increasing distance from the physical world. In short, the standards of Western art reflected white people's increasing estrangement from reality. Conversely, black artists, according to Baraka, did not have the luxury of such abstract artistic ambitions. Black artists were necessarily agents of political action whose works must reflect and encourage the urgent matters of black life.<sup>28</sup> This formulation of race, the role of artist/intellectual, and the peculiar conundrum this presented for male Black Arts authors will be explored at length in the next chapter. However, returning to the essay "Leroi Jones Talking," while the fundamental incongruity of black literature in the context of white literary criticism informs the bulk of the essay, it is in the final paragraph where Baraka gives in to the paradigm of symbolism and offers an explanation of the *actual* meaning of his play:

Clay is a young boy who is trying desperately to become a man. *Dutchman* is about the difficulty of becoming a man in America. It is very difficult to be sure, if you are black, but I think it is now much harder to become one if you're white. In fact, you will find very few white males who have the slightest knowledge of what manhood involves. They are too busy running the world or running from it.<sup>29</sup>

Baraka's ultimate compliance with symbolic meaning making suggest that perhaps it is not that he wholly rejects symbolism but rather the limited and compelled insights of those supplying the explanations. Baraka is asserting a specific concern regarding a history of racial troping that restricts the complexity and agency of black authors and their literary subjects. Baraka is critiquing the white critic/standard that, like society at large, can only read the black subject as a symbol.

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explanation allows for a consideration of *a* meaning which functions explicate specific rhetorical and ideological elements of Baraka's influential views of race and sexuality in the latter half of the 1960s.

<sup>27</sup> Amri Baraka, "Leroi Jones Talking," *Home: Social Essays*, 213.

<sup>28</sup> Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *Home: Social Essays*, 236-243.

<sup>29</sup> Baraka, "Leroi Jones is Talking," 213.



Nevertheless, Baraka's interpretation, as concentrated in this quote, outlines my reading of the play as symbolic of his crafting of gendered racialization in a number of key ways. Firstly, Clay is placed in state of pre-manhood; a state in which his focus is a transformative process of "becoming a man in America" (emphasis mine).<sup>30</sup> This gendered becoming is not racially neutral; rather, it is fundamentally racially particularized. The transformation, in Reid-Pharr's language, from "Negro to Black"<sup>31</sup> was legible via a transformation from emasculation (negro maleness) to masculinity (black manhood). As Cheryl Clarke states, "blackness structured manhood and manhood became the desired end of blackness."<sup>32</sup> Within the conceptual context in which manhood was *the* fundamental substance of authentic black being the focus on masculine becoming can reasonably be understood as doubling as, or at least largely overlapping with, racial becoming. Thus, my reading contests that the process of Clay becoming a man is in dialectic conversation with the process of him becoming a racial subject. Accordingly, such a proposition implies that his racialized state at the stage of pre-masculine being is racially ambiguous. Moreover, it is the ambiguity of Clay's racial status that suggests the complicated question: of what race of man is he becoming? Moreover, do both races share the same masculine capacity?

It is the type of suspect quasi-blackness, that of an acculturated "middle class" "Negro" "boy," which Clay personifies that suggests that his process of masculine becoming may not necessarily result in "becoming" a *black* man. Rather Clay's process of male becoming is one of a boy whose internalized racial angst operates as a motivation to engage in a process of masculine becoming that is meant to double as a racial transformation to whiteness. The internal anxiety of Clay's racial identity, his latent essential blackness versus his affective and aesthetic signifiers of desired acculturation to whiteness, is to be resolved, one way or another, via his becoming a man. However, this intended racial transformation is stymied by its gendered mode of facilitation. While Baraka admits that male "becoming" will be difficult for a black boy, it is "now much harder" to become a man if one is a white boy. For Baraka, the white "male," as opposed to "man," is one whose biological sex of maleness is denied masculine properties as a result of their race. The dialectic of white and male produces a state of terminal boyhood in which male does not become man.

In the broader context of Baraka's formulation of the gendered nature of the white race, whiteness and manhood are fundamentally incongruent. White men were increasingly emasculating themselves via the decadence of technology and disembodied modes of socio-economic authority. It was ironically the spoils of societal patriarchy that were corroding the essential qualities of masculinity. This racial and, as we will see, class-specific emasculation resulted in a degenerating sexual capacity and non-normative gender and familial dynamic that threatened National/white survival. In effect the white boy's male "becoming" was increasingly a process in which the terms of masculinity had been perverted by racial decadence and thus functioned as a kind of masculine unbecoming.

Baraka would articulate this state of socially engineered masculine unbecoming in explicitly homophobic terms in the notorious essay from the collection *Home: Social Essays*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire and the Black American Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 131.

<sup>32</sup> Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 18.

entitled “American Sexual Reference: Black Male.” “American Sexual Reference” marks a tradition of logic that grounded Cleaver’s mimetic white male “omnipotent administrator” in *Soul On Ice* and which extends the sexually fumbling white “square” who seeks masculine restitution in Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster.” Baraka infamously leads the essay with the proclamation that “Most American white men are trained to fags.”<sup>33</sup> Baraka goes on: “they devote their energies to the nonrealistic, having no use for the real. They devote their energies to the nonphysical, the nonrealistic, and become estranged from them.”<sup>34</sup> The “fag” is formulated as a white, socially manufactured “disease,” which signified male alienation from “natural” attributes of manhood, those of sexual virility and physical strength.<sup>35</sup> The decadence of over-consumption, technological reliance, and material wealth was understood to have produced an alienation from body and spirit. The modern white man was gradually losing the essence of his manhood; he was becoming unnatural, less masculine. He *becomes* a fag as a consequence of a specifically racialized socialization process of sexual and gender retardation.

This unnatural male state of whiteness was increasingly sexually arid as it was alienated from its primal sexual nature. While the notion was articulated, often overtly, through violently homophobic language, the term must be understood as extending beyond literal acts of same sex *desire* for into a more broadly intended designation of masculine failure. For Baraka and various other Black Power ideologues that would follow his lead, whiteness *was* faggotry because it was the failure of a specific conception of manhood that was predicated upon earthly connectivity, physical capacity, and willingness for violence and, finally, heterosexual virility. In this respect, whiteness was dying under the weight of the failed manhood it was self-producing. The conflation of whiteness and faggotry led to the collapse of the two into a discourse in which “faggot” could be utilized in articulating anti- or rejected black manhood that mimicked white maleness’s racialized masculine incompetence. As noted in Chapter 1 Philip Brian Harper points out that homosexuality was the “primary signifier” of “insufficient racial identification... figured specifically in terms of failed manhood.”<sup>36</sup> However, we can now see that such *charges* of homosexuality were intended as semantically conducive to charges of engagement in white masculine failure. While the black male homosexual signified the failure of black manhood, the discursive labeling of homophobic nouns, particularly that of “faggot,” was not limited to those engaged in or suspected of engaging in same sex acts.

Ron Simmons writes, “faggots are the epitome of what Baraka opposes.” I do not disagree. Nor do I disagree when Simmons later writes, “Gay men are the antithesis of what he idealizes as the “black man.”<sup>37</sup> However, it is the relationship of the two sentences that is overly categorical and misleading in its assumptive connotation and is illustrative of a fundamental, and consequential, over-assertion regarding Baraka usage of homophobic language. Where Simmons and others falter is in their strict connection between Baraka’s “faggots” and gay men. Faggot was a descriptive for Baraka of emasculation, an emasculation that was suitably directed towards

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<sup>33</sup> Amiri Baraka, “American Sexual Reference: Black Male,” *Home: Social Essays*, 243-263.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 244.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 262.

<sup>36</sup> Harper, *Are We Not Men*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Ron Simmons, “Baraka’s Dilemma: To Be or Not to Be?” in *Black Men on Race, Gender and Sexuality: A Critical Reader*, ed. Devon W. Carbado (New York; New York University. 1999), 317-323.

heterosexuals, or at least men involved in heterosexual relationships, as well as gay men. Mathew Reborn has argued that Baraka “others” queer men with the intention of abjectifying them.”<sup>38</sup> However, it is necessary to also consider this observation with inverted language; Baraka *queers* men in order to announce their “othered” abjection. Take for instance Baraka’s late bohemian poem “Hymn for Lonnie Poo” in which he writes, “my sister’s boyfriend is a faggot music teacher.”<sup>39</sup> Or in Baraka’s play *The Slave*, where protagonist Walker Vessels refers to his ex-wife’s new partner as a “faggot husband.”<sup>40</sup> There is in Baraka’s usage seemingly no logical quandary in directly coupling the term faggot with terms that indicate heterosexual relationships, “husband” and his sister’s “boyfriend.” In both instances, it is not the sexual behavior or preference of the characters that earns them the title; it is rather their masculine lack resulting from their, in the words of Herbert Marcuse, trained white “bourgeoisification.”<sup>41</sup> Easley is a caricature of white liberal intelligentsia, a University professor who, in his state of pompous paternalism denounces the violent racial revolution occurring around him. On the other hand, “Lonnie Poo’s faggot boyfriend” is but one figure in a list of items and practices tethered to Lonnie Poo that are meant to announce her sister’s self-indulgent plundering of middle class whiteness.

E. Patrick Johnson notes that the disavowing of queered white maleness serves as, in Judith Butler’s terms, a racially specific gendered citation necessary to conceptualize a stable black masculinity. In turn, Johnson puts forth that Baraka’s white fag implies the black homosexual as “penultimate anti-black sentiment.”<sup>42</sup> However, as noted, the mistake is to assume that, like the “white fag,” the “black fag” necessarily is gay. Instead it is a masculine failure approximating white male failure articulated through sexual othering. Marlon Ross has persuasively argued that for Baraka the term “faggot” existed at the intersection of two seemingly bifurcated sets of cultural lexicon: that of the primarily white queer “camp” discourse of the bohemian beat scene and that of the urban black male rhetorical practice of the “dozens.”<sup>43</sup> In essence, Ross argues that Baraka mixes the playful insiderist usage of “fag” amongst those in gay communities with an oral tradition of black signifying that utilized sexuality as resource of announcing one’s masculine potency or another’s masculine lack. For my purposes, the utility of Ross’s reading is that Baraka’s usage of the term originates at a cross-section of cultural contexts in which the term “fag” is meant to designate a specific affiliation with gayness, which I contest is a quality in approximation to whiteness rather than necessarily as homosexuality. Moreover, when the term is brought into the context of intraracial homosocial jousting, “sexuality is a resource for racial identification”<sup>44</sup> and, furthermore, epithetic sexual discourse may be used as a

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<sup>38</sup> Mathew Reborn, “Flaying Dutchman: Masochism, Minstrelsy, and the Gender Politics of Amiri Baraka’s ‘Dutchman,’” *Callaloo* 26.3 (Summer, 2003): 800.

<sup>39</sup> Baraka, “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 4-10.

<sup>40</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman and The Slave: Two Plays*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001,) 54.

<sup>41</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man; Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 58.

<sup>43</sup> Marlon Ross, “Camping the Dirty Dozens: The Queer Resources of Black Nationalist Invective,” *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 290-312.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 291.

specific form of black masculine critique and dis-identification by way of approximation to whiteness.

While homophobic language served as the tool of rhetorical naming of the racially traitorous, the embrace of a host of white middle class social sensibilities made the black faggot culturally intelligible. For Baraka, passive manner, affected language, non-confrontational political dispositions and temperament associated with white bourgeois values each likely reflected an individualist aspiration towards token inclusion at the expense of the black folk masses. However, the well-being of the majority black populace was not the only thing sacrificed; racial self-loathing resulted in the voluntary acquiescence to masculine mutilation. The consequence of earning the status of “qualified” or “college trained” “MC Negro” (“middle class” or “master of ceremonies,” i.e., those acting as frontlines of ceremonial black submission to white dominance) was a castrated male psyche.<sup>45</sup> This emasculated state can be read both as alienation from blackness and masculine responsibilities and as an embrace or mimicry of a particular variant of white maleness.

The importance of these characteristics is that they seek to replicate a specific type of whiteness. This specific type of whiteness, similar to Cleaver’s white male “omnipotent administrator,” had specific sexualized implications in Baraka’s formulation. For Baraka, white males of what might be called the “administrative class” were characterized through perpetual social decadence and dislocation from the realities of the body. As noted, this socially engineered estrangement from masculine essence was understood by Baraka as “training” to become a “fag.” However, importantly, Baraka wrote “*most* white men were trained to be fags” (emphasis mine). My emphasis on *most* is not to call attention to the interesting implied prospect of the assumedly *untrained* white men whose masculinity has not been compromised.<sup>46</sup> Rather it is the racially transferable character traits of those *trained* white fags whom Baraka’s Uncle Tom figures attempted to emulate. It was the men of political and social standing; those caught in the emasculative undertow of technology and disembodied modes of omnipotent social rule that provided the blueprint for Uncle Tom’s desired whiteness. Baraka biographer Jerry Watts asserts that for Baraka “assimilation and acculturation were identical.”<sup>47</sup> The importance of this assertion being that *this* manner of white maleness was subject to the social “training” or acculturation into becoming a fag. *Training* is also a key term in Baraka’s phrasing as it announces the production of a state of identity rather than a natural racial ontology. While whiteness as phenotype may have remained unrealizable, the racialized terms of white male “training” were, at the least, available for mimicry and, at most, fully adoptable for black males. Thus the Uncle Tom, in his racial self-loathing, also loathed his masculine nature and in an effort to reject both voluntarily yearned for acculturation into a socio-political system that fundamentally was a training to “become” a “fag” in the sense of “fag” being the white emasculated societal patriarch.

Let us briefly apply this logic to a particular Baraka work, “Civil Rights Poem.” This reading will stage the utility of Baraka’s schema in considering the terms of Clay’s masculine

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<sup>45</sup> Baraka, “The Last Days of the American Empire (Including Some Instructions for Black People),” *Home: Social Essays*, 222.

<sup>46</sup> This is, however, a compelling notion. Baraka’s later work as a pronounced Marxist suggests a retrospective reading of this quote that could suggest that white emasculation was not a consequence of racial essentialism but of racialized labor politics.

<sup>47</sup> Watts, *Amiri Baraka*, 121.

“becoming” as steeped in the faggotry of white male societal patriarchs upon which Baraka’s figuration of the Uncle Tom was grounded.

Roy Wilkins is an eternal faggot  
 His spirit is a faggot  
 His projection and image, this is  
 to say, if I ever see roywilkins  
 on the sidewalks  
 imonna  
 stick half my sandal  
 up his  
 ass<sup>48</sup>

Baraka’s piece takes aim at political and masculine failure within the Civil Rights Movement via homophobic rhetoric. Here we see the interchangeability of Uncle Tom and faggot in Baraka’s semiotic matrix of black masculine failure. As Harper and Johnson point out through their respective readings of “Civil Rights Poem,” the Civil Rights Movement acted as a prime terrain where Baraka connected his figurative Uncle Tom to an adopted white emasculation. Baraka re-cast prime Civil Rights strategies and objectives as expressions of racial self-loathing that manifested as a desired acceptance into a white sociopolitical landscape, and consequent abandonment of the masculine duty of protectors and providers of the race. In this instance his aim is initially individualized towards then-NAACP president Roy Wilkins who, comparable to Baldwin, often was used by Black Power pundits to stand in as an embodiment of Civil Rights political ideologies and ethos.<sup>49</sup> This is not an attack on Wilkins’s sexuality but *through his* sexuality to question his political disposition. Namely his invocation of “Black Power” as the slogan of “antagonists” invested in “anti-white-power” and his leading role in an organization that some had come to critique for wading into reformist and bourgeois initiatives. Specifically notable was the NACCP’s statement issued and signed by Wilkins on October 17<sup>th</sup> 1966, which functioned as an organizational revocation of the swelling usage of term “Black Power.” Moreover, this is not intended as the battering of a homosexual but rather a premier Uncle Tom by way of the already established failure of the whitened conception of the “faggot.” For instance, consider that Baraka does not choose Bayard Rustin, whose sexuality had come to be a primary public consideration in his role as key architect and spokesman of Civil Rights, as singularizing representative of the “eternal faggot” of Civil Rights.<sup>50</sup> That is to say, the poem’s selection and characterization of Wilkins makes clear that it is not the same sex desire of a figure such as Rustin which is at issue in the critique of Civil Rights. Rather, it is the “projection” of faggot “image,” not be conflated with same sex acts but rather with the emasculating pull of whiteness, which compromise Wilkins and the “Civil Rights” cohort he represents. As has been

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<sup>48</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 115.

<sup>49</sup> Baraka biographer Jerry Watts describes Roy Wilkins as consistently being the “whipping boy” of Black Arts/Black Power advocates in critiques of Civil Rights politics.

<sup>50</sup> However, Baraka did in a number of instances berate Rustin personally by collapsing his sexuality and political position into mutually constitutive elements of his black traitorousness. Most notoriously claiming “You are a slave ship profiteer, a paid pervert for the racist unions, and I feel it necessary to expose you.”

suggested, the term “faggot” here is to be understood, in Baraka’s conception of the word’s meaning, as a word that strips Wilkins of his manhood, and thus blackness, via the connotative relationship the term holds to masculine compromise of “trained” white maleness.

What is interesting and telling about this particular phrasing is the use of the word “eternal” to preface the word “faggot.” The wording suggests the possible temporality of being a faggot. Here “eternal” insinuates an everlasting failed potential, an irrecoverable state of being. Wilkins will always be a faggot in the mind of Baraka, a notion that translates into the idea that he will always be cowardly and never assert his black masculinity. This assertion is emboldened by the next line: “his [Wilkins] spirit is a faggot.” This disembodied designation of faggotry, that of the spirit, further ruptures presumptions of the terms meaning. Wilkins’ emasculation is a quality of his soul, and while the colloquial usage of “soul” in the period is difficult to pin down during the Black Power era and beyond, in the words of Aretha Franklin, “Soul is black.”<sup>51</sup> Clearly, for Baraka, Wilkins’s spirit, despite his body, is not black. Further, Wilkins’ essence, without any suggestion of same gender erotic proclivity, is signified as compromised through an epithet associated with white male lack. As Harper has pointed out for Baraka, Wilkins’s “faggotry” is “unforgivable.”<sup>52</sup> However, while Wilkins is clearly doomed in the mind of Baraka, his directive in fact opens up a space for others to avoid the “eternal” and “spiritual” racial damnation that has consumed Wilkins.

The eternity of Wilkins’ faggotry implies the prospective recoverability of others’ lost black masculinity. The flipside of the “eternal faggot” is the implied “not necessarily eternal faggot,” and thus perspective forgiveness for the recovered man. Clay qualifies as a one whose faggotry is not necessarily eternal yet currently impeding his *true* identity. The prospect of Clay’s male “becoming” is, like the “training” of white males to be fags, a liminal space that allows and suggests a potential rehabilitation from a state of temporally dislocated blackness and embodied whitened faggotry. Such a prospect reiterates the learned, i.e. unnatural, coupling of blackness and the previously cited traits conjoined with the homophobic rhetoric. The importance of this point becomes clear when considering that the title of the poem is “Civil Rights Poem,” a title that suggests a rather sweeping array of participants and supporters. Wilkins serves as the example of a broader Civil Rights Movement associated failure by virtue of his emblematic faggotry. Baraka directs his audience’s attention to *an* embodied site of male failure, which stands as the collective failure of Civil Rights to properly lead black people, in order to inform the reader whom they must *not* be like.

Indeed, Roy Wilkins could be termed an Uncle Tom just as reasonably as a faggot in this poem. Each term, Uncle Tom and faggot, collide in what Emily Bernard has termed a looming “specter of whiteness,”<sup>53</sup> an omnipresent racialized and I would add emasculated essence which governs each term’s relationship to racially compromised meaning. Clay is a case in point. He is never explicitly named a “faggot” in *Dutchman*, yet he is constantly designated as an “Uncle Tom,” “Uncle Wooly Head,” and “fake middle class white man” by both the accusatory Lula and

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<sup>51</sup> For extensive consideration of the term “soul” in the Black Power era, including Aretha Franklin’s comment see *Soul: Black Power, Politics and Pleasure*, eds. Monique Guillory and Richard Greene, (New York: New York University Press, 1997.)

<sup>52</sup> Harper, *Are We Not Men*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Emily Bernard, “A Familiar Strangeness: The Spectre of Whiteness in the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts the Movement,” *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 264.

the self-deprecating Clay. Conversely Roy Wilkins as individual figurehead of Civil Rights or as unspecific follower of Civil Rights ethos are named “faggot” to articulate the implications of their status as Uncle Tom.

This collapsing of race and sexuality meant that while Baraka and Black Power rhetoricians at large often utilized inflammatory homophobic language, it was not necessary to articulate insinuations about racial or sexual failure. For if (male) whiteness has been made or “trained” to be “faggot,” then traits or activities understood as white when practiced by black men come to be conflated with being a faggot. Therefore, homophobic nouns do not need to be overtly stated to be present in Black Power masculinity critiques of those deemed to be failed black men. Rather, any type of suggestion of failed blackness as a consequence of yearning for whiteness is coated with implicit connotations of the masculine failure signified through homophobic discourse. By tracing the concentric space Uncle Tom and Faggot share within the purview of Baraka’s Black Nationalist era semiotic landscape, one sees that it is the status of masculinity as (dis)proof of authentic blackness, and not *necessarily* homosexuality, which governs the meaning of the term faggot.

The generative irony of defining the central thrust of the term’s meaning in this way is that it opens the counter-intuitive space to consider the status of the black faggot as resulting from interracial heterosexual desire. Specifically, Clay’s status as a faggot Uncle Tom as catalyzed through an interracial heterosexual liaison. It is a liaison in which the faggotry of Clay’s Uncle Tomming is evidenced by the motivations of his interracial heterosexual desire. In her discipline-shaping book *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick famously adapts Rene Girard’s schematic by conceptualizing homosocial rivalry through a triangulated model of male-female-male. Within this triangulated model Sedgwick contests that homosocial tensions do not necessarily manifest as direct male confrontation but are instead mediated through rivaling for a female. Sedgwick’s model is useful when considering *a* black man as rivaling *the* “White Man”<sup>54</sup> over racialized patriarchal authority. Sedgwick points out the role of interracial heterosexual “desire,” rather than heterosexual love, denotes the homosocial dynamic at play within the heterosexual relationship and reflects back upon the primary desire laden anxiety between men.<sup>55</sup> In this case we can see Clay’s desire for, and in Baraka’s Nationalist critique, submission to, the terms of white male patriarchy by way of interracial heterosexual desire.

However, reading the desire for and availability of Lula, a wanton white woman who ostentatiously flaunts her sexual accessibility, would seemingly lead us directly down a path cleared by the likes of Cleaver, Mailer, and Baraka himself where interracial sex assumes a racially liberatory quality. This path of reasoning requires explication before its inversion can be adequately pursued. What each of these men shared was an articulation of white females as the embodied materiality of white male patriarchal social authority. Ann McClintok, Ann Laura Stoler, and bell hooks, to name only a few prime examples, have all helped to articulate the consistent interplay of race, gender, and sexuality in the phallogocentric nature of imperial

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<sup>54</sup>This language draws upon Black Power vernacular conception of “The White Man” or simply “The Man,” as system agents and agencies in service of the omnipotent dictating of systemic racism.

<sup>55</sup>Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

conquest.<sup>56</sup> Taking a cue from these scholars, in conjunction with Sedgwick's paradigm of homosociality, in the context of Cleaver and Baraka, and Mailer indirectly, we see the proverbial tool of masculinist conquest, that of sexual violation doubling as a conquering of a rivaling male's domain, in full appropriation as means of resistance. The white female exists as conduit of homosocial interracial vengeance against white male systems of black emasculation. The white female is cast primarily as an extension of white male authority and the primary sign by which to inflict prospective suffering upon the white male ego. White female sexual transgression of interracial sex, whether voluntary or involuntary, manifests as victimizing the white male who failed to protect the domain of their masculine birthright.

While, as we have seen in Chapter 2, Cleaver deals candidly with rape as a willful criminal act mutated into revolutionary insurgence, Baraka considers interracial rape as an unavoidable psychic consequence of the instability of white masculinity. For instance, Baraka states in "American Sexual Reference" that, "The average ofay thinks of every black man as potentially raping every white lady in sight, which is true, in the sense that the black man should want to rob the white man of everything he has."<sup>57</sup> Here we see Baraka, like Cleaver, equate the raping of white women with the robbery of "everything," insinuating that ultimately the female sex and the ability to protect her is "everything" that the white man "has," i.e., possesses.<sup>58</sup> Rape is equated with conquest and the masculine invasion by a foreign body, which signifies the incapacitated masculinity of the supposed protective patriarch. However, within this crude formulation is a key subtlety that exposes a current of logic, which passes into Baraka's construction of Clay. Baraka states that every white man "thinks" black men are potential sexual assaulters of all white women, focusing our attention on the psychic insecurity and guilt of white males. This is, for Baraka, a justifiable fear in the sense that white men should fear black vengeance. However, it is the white male fear of black masculinity corrupting the sanctity of white feminine chastity that determines interracial sex, non-consensual or consensual, as a crime against white male authority. In this respect, Baraka seems to infer that interracial sexual violence is *always* occurring psychically in the white male imagination. Thus, a physical crime of sexual violence would be any act of black male/white female interracial sex and is necessarily preceded by the perpetual reoccurrence of the crime in white male psyche. Thus, the likes of Clay are the *would-be rapists*; it is, put colloquially, only a matter of time. However, only shortly after the previous quote, Baraka doubles down on white male sexual insecurity and explains that rape is entirely unnecessary as a literal act as white women engage in willful sex with black men as the only hope of "getting properly popped."<sup>59</sup> Baraka, with his keenly derisive tone diagnosis white male paranoia only to suggest that perhaps, in light of white male sexual failure, such anxiety is not unfounded.

In this scenario Lula would be doubly sexually repressed both by the restrictive social margins of her expected modesty and by the erotic incompetence of her white male bedfellows. Thus sexually starved, she would lust for the innate virility of Clay's masculine blackness. If this

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<sup>56</sup> See Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (London: Routledge, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>57</sup> Baraka, "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," 255.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 256.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 256.



logic were followed, Clay would recognize Lula as a physical instrument by which to recover from his own psychological racial castration. For Clay, sex, in this case consensual sex, if such a notion were possible in this theoretical context, catalyzed by the clear albeit insidious lust of Lula would impel a cathartic vengeance upon the figurative white male societal patriarch. The implication of this logic is that voluntary sex operates as a more complete and devastating form of theft than rape. Voluntary interracial sex signals the white female as a willing collaborator in the emasculation of white manhood.

The characters are, on the surface, clearly available for such a reading. For instance, one could read Clay as involved the “The Ritual of Inter-Racial Sex,” as Dianne Weisgham has called it, where the menacing black rapist is re-cast as black masculine hero who draws catharsis through the literalizing of the national white male nightmare.<sup>60</sup> However, the prospect that interracial sex as crusade on the domain of white manhood fails to account for the substance of the protagonist, Clay, or the antagonist, Lula. If they were simply the sum of their racial and gendered myths of *the* black man and *the* white women, the reading is sustainable. However, the manner in which each complicates those labels suggests such a reading may have qualities of shortsightedness. Clay in the hands of Baraka is not *the* “black man” and Lula is not *the* “white woman” in the sense that they each overtly dislodge expected normative qualities of those typifications. To return to Weber’s notion of ideal types, these are *de*-idealized types at their most idealized. Typifying these characters via race and gender gets us only as far as considering the manner in which these characteristics trouble the assumed essential quality of blackness/masculinity and whiteness/femininity. That is to say, it is the ways in which Clay is not black or man or Lula white or woman that complicates the terms of black male/white female relationship and how such a relationship is governed by the hegemonic qualities of racial and gendered subjectivity of white maleness.

At this stage I read directly against a reading that suggests that a sexual partnership with Lula serves as a passageway to Clay’s black masculinity. For instance, Michele Wright claims Clay lusts for a “super masculine” state in his liaison with Lula.<sup>61</sup> However, Clay is the dominated social partner who shies away from the connotative super-masculinity of his racial being. Rather than an assertion of seditious bravado sexuality becomes a prospective inauguration into white maleness. However, such a transformation, boy to man and concurrently black to white, is greatly limited by the paradox that is white manhood as explained above. Interracial sex becomes an ironic and perhaps even untenable channel to white manhood as on the other side of interracial sex the black boy will find himself an emasculated white male faggot. As such, the racial transformation from failed Negro male to white man could not actually accomplish masculine becoming as whiteness, in its iterations as Clay is meant to exude them, and is antithetical to masculinity. In fact, Clay is floundering further away from manhood, and blackness, through his yearning for Lula.

Lula is, in the words of Kathryn Stevenson, a “sexual outlaw.”<sup>62</sup> She assumes a classically masculine quality of sexual blatancy that, per the historical governing constraints of

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<sup>60</sup> Dianne Weisgham, “LeRoi Jones' Dutchman: Inter-Racial Ritual of Sexual Violence,” *American Imago* 29.3 (1972): 215-232.

<sup>61</sup> Michele Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 130.

<sup>62</sup> Stevenson, Kathryn, “Scarlet Equations: Representing Black Men, 1940-1964,” (dissertation, University of California Riverside, 2007,) 174.

the Cult of True Womanhood, makes her a racial outlaw as well. Lula's whiteness is *meant* to curb her sexual forwardness. These standards of womanhood—those of social civility, prudence and passive public presence—are entwined in standards of whiteness and thus come to mean that spurning of femininity doubles as a willing perversion of racial identity. Sherley Ann Williams points out the importance of the fact that it is Lula who initiates and controls the relationship with Clay. Additionally, Williams notes that she wields this control to “goad(s) him into revealing things which must have been carefully hidden deep in the most secret parts of his heart.”<sup>63</sup> Early in their interaction Lula prods at Clay by stating: “You look like you’re trying to grow a beard. That’s exactly what you look like. You look like you live in New Jersey with your parents and are trying to grow a beard. That’s what. You look like you’ve been reading Chinese Poetry and drinking lukewarm tea. You look like death eating a soda cracker”<sup>64</sup>

Let us consider Clay’s “beard” both as metaphor and physical sign of racialized maleness that is willfully pursued yet ultimately unobtainable. That is to say, he is “*trying* to grow a beard” (emphasis mine) in more ways than one. Firstly, his “bumpy face” is a physical sign of his desire to escape his dependent boyhood and establish himself independently as man. He is literally, to recall Baraka’s terming, “becoming a man”; his *attempt* to signal this physical fact makes clear both its development and yet its incompleteness. However, I am more interested in designating Lula to be, in the contemporary colloquial sense, “a beard,” as in the embodied proof of Clay’s desire to embody the white hetero-normative patriarch. Lula as “beard” is meant to serve as Clay’s accessing of normative racial subject status and thus out of the supposed essential gendered inadequacy of blackness.

Clay’s desire for Lula, which is wistful, not forceful, calls to mind Fanon’s consideration of the colonized black males’ motivations for sex with white females in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In Fanon’s estimation, interracial sex was a passage into the human subjectivity of “dignity” and “civilization” reserved for whites; it was not black rebellion but rather, even if only fleetingly, racial transformation. Fanon writes in first person narrative style: “I am *loved* like a white man, I am a white man.”<sup>65</sup> Within the ideological landscape of Baraka, Clay’s faggotry is willful as a compulsory connotative consequence of the racialized (em)masculine state he mimics and which his sexual desire for Lula bolsters. In this sense, Lula as “beard” should be understood as serving a racial purpose with gendered consequences. Lula as Clay’s “beard” will *whiten* Clay, in his mind, while concurrently making him a faggot in Baraka’s schema of white male emasculation and Uncle Tom adoption of white maleness.

Despite her patronizing manner, Lula is not merely teasing Clay; rather, she correctly establishes intimate biographical information through what is at that point a merely cursory knowledge of him. Clay nervously confirms Lula’s statements, “how did you know all that about huh? Really? About Jersey... and even about the beard?”<sup>66</sup> Clay’s legitimate question is never concretely answered. Rather, Lula seems to know Clay because Clay is knowable. Lula explicates Clay’s status as an Uncle Tom through a process of evidential exposures by which racial and gendered signifiers can be interpreted into indications of psychological and social facts. Theater and Performance scholar Carla McDonough argues that Clay is engaged in

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<sup>63</sup> Sherley Anne Williams, “The Search for Identity in Baraka’s *Dutchman*,” *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1978), 140.

<sup>64</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 63.

<sup>66</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 9.

“performing” whiteness.<sup>67</sup> Lula’s words locate his “performed whiteness” at sites of gendered (non) becoming. It is a conception that implies her recognition of behavior and affect that signal of white male normativity and its shortcomings. Clay’s “3 button suit”<sup>68</sup> and “striped tie”;<sup>69</sup> his “dull, dull, dull”<sup>70</sup> social affect and his “corny”<sup>71</sup> attempts at flirtation are, in Lula’s psychoanalysis, physical and social citations of white maleness.

Clay, shocked by Lula’s consistently accurate announcements about his biography, inquires, “how you know all that?” Clay is quickly assured by Lula that “I don’t know *you*” specifically, but rather that “I know the type very well.”<sup>72</sup> In fact, Lula tells Clay, he is one of a “well known type.” Clay is the sum of his classification, a classification that is understood by Lula and, I would argue, Baraka through a gradual *de*-codification of his performative self. It is this nature of this *type*, one whose individualism is subsumed by the commonality of like performers that suggests the *true* Clay remains unknown, a dangerous and enticing prospect for Lula. Indeed, it would seem that her duty (the notebook she carries signaling her list of targets), as assigned by an abstracted white male figurehead assumedly, to know such a type in order to reveal their true nature. Interestingly, Lula as agent of State ethos of anti-blackness finds her self in step with Black Power intraracial criticisms. Andrzej Ceynowa points out that Lula’s “sentiments about middle class black assimilationists are the same as Black Nationalists.”<sup>73</sup> In the words of long time *Village Voice* contributor and formative Black Aesthetic theorist Clayton Riley, “From his dress to his speech, Clay is all America could want to claim as a product of its emasculating social machinery.”<sup>74</sup> Lula’s illustrative castigation of Clay’s physical appearance and affect is verification of a Black Nationalist concern regarding the very real danger of voluntary black emasculation. Opposing sides’ find themselves at a precarious cross-section in Lula. Her odd position allows her to specific evaluative and performative capacity and limitation.

Judith Butler states that gender is a “related stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.”<sup>75</sup> Lula can see quite plainly that it is the rigid gendered frame of race that stymies Clay’s capacity to assume white determined maleness and at the same time signals his (voluntary) failure to assume the stylized acts that had come to regulate black maleness. Homi Bhabha, through his classic consideration of Fanonian Manichean delirium induced by colonial discourses, has explicated the inborn and ironic effect of mimicry as reinforcing fundamental essentialist notions of blackness within the same motions in which it seeks to repel them. Mimicry necessarily implies an innate incongruence of the mimicker (i.e., Clay, the black male other) and the mimicked (i.e., white male subject). In other words, to act

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<sup>67</sup> Carla J. McDonough, *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 30-32.

<sup>68</sup> *Dutchman*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 9-12.

<sup>73</sup> Andrzej Ceynowa, "The Dramatic Structure of *Dutchman*," *Black American Literature Forum* 17.1(1983): 15-18.

<sup>74</sup> Clayton Riley, “On Black Theatre,” *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Double Day & Company, 1972), 299.

<sup>75</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On Discursive of Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 33.

*like* someone is to announce that one is, in fact, *not* that someone. The manhood that Clay aspires to, that of the white male birthright of omnipotent western subjectivity is accessible only as far as mimicry is possible. He exists at a site of what Deridda calls a point of “antre,” an unrelenting purgatory of “inbetweenness,” in this case between essentialist qualities of authentic blackness and implications of mimetic whiteness. What is more, the man he wishes to become is, like all white middle class men, ironically unable to acquire the masculine status meant as his/their racial birthright. Clay is stationed at a crossroad between the figurative impotence of blackness’s incurable estrangement from societal patriarchy and the impotence of whiteness as a state of embodied sexual and combative incapacity.

Lula presses upon Clay’s conflicted sense of selfhood through her “weird combination”<sup>76</sup> of embodied seductive white female allurements and a berating of his racial authenticity via what Mathew Reborn identifies as her Mailer-esque bohemian “white negro” minstrelsy.<sup>77</sup> At once Lula is whiter, as the embodiment of feminine purity, and blacker, by way of her appropriated stylistic hipness and masculine sexual wantonness than the phenotypically black yet stubble-necked and “corny” Clay. The duality of Lula’s racialization, her body as white and feminized and her posturing as black and masculinized, each acts to catalyze Clay’s two most definitive attempts as self-actualizations. As shown, Lula’s phenotype and sex initially acts as an embodied entry point for Clay to culminate his racially transformative ambitions. However, it is ironically her “white negro” minstrelsy that evokes the paradigm of Black Nationalist intraracial homosocial challenge to Clay’s racial manhood.

On this point, I would like to conclude by considering and ultimately questioning the prospect that Clay’s ultimate masculine “becoming” is achieved right before his murder at the hands of Lula. The likes of Baraka scholar Lloyd Brown, Theatre and Performance scholar Genevive Fabre, and prominent literary theorist Houston A. Baker have consistently and compellingly argued Clay’s latent blackness/masculinity surfaces at the climactic concluding monologue of the play. It is argued that at this point in the play, Clay, in response to Lula’s insistent critique, sheds his disguise as “Uncle Tom” to announce that he has the “true pumping black heart”<sup>78</sup> of a commanding and furious avenger of white racism.<sup>79</sup> Such a reading would

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<sup>76</sup> *Home*, 25

<sup>77</sup> Mathew Reborn, “Flaying Dutchman: Masochism, Minstrelsy and the Gender Politics of Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*,” *Callaloo* 26.3 (Summer 2003): 796-812. To extend Reborn’s formulation, Lula’s claims through varying iterations that Clay is type of “white negro” can be inverted to consider Lula as the embodiment of Mailer’s conception of the “white negro.” In Mailer’s formulation, the “white negro” is the white male bohemian whose bravado is acquired through the adoption of supposed orgasmic liberation of the socially uninhibited cavalier “black psychopath.” While Mailer’s “white negro” is male, Baraka’s previously explained assessment of white female sexuality as “men thins” allows for Lula’s space into Mailer’s formulation of white compensative and fetishized appropriations of black masculine virility. That is to say her masculinization is made through a, to borrow from Scott, her “blackening.” Lula both seeks and mimics black masculine sexuality, a prospect that begs considerable questions about the nature of white female sexual desire.

<sup>78</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 34.

<sup>79</sup> Lloyd Brown, *Amiri Baraka* (Boston: Twayne, 1980); Genevive Fabre, *Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983);

suggest that Clay is not the “*eternal faggot*” (emphasis mine) that Roy Wilkins is. The innate limitation of mimicry suggested by Bhabha in fact allows for Clay’s realizable racial “recovery.” However, this announced racial revival and avowed blackness is generally understood to be justification for his murder at the hands of Lula. In such readings, Lula serves as the provoking catalyst by which Clay’s unadulterated racial and gendered self ultimately emerges. Clay becomes the self-actualized agentive black man who is, in the reason of white supremacy, justifiably tamed only by violence.

In this reading, Clay’s concealed blackness is unveiled by the taunting of Lula. Clay’s diatribe not only announces his inner rage towards white people generally but also specifically inverts Lula’s lambasting by mocking her as erotically incompetent, awkward and ultimately overtly rejecting her as a prospective sexual partner. If passive desire for Lula is the signal of Clay’s proximity to effeminized white faggotry then the actively repulsed rejection of Lula as sexual partner is the sign of Clay’s awakened black masculine essence. In this respect, it is not interracial sex but the rejection of interracial sex that signals Clay’s agentive and insurgent rejection of white manhood.

Following Clay’s fiery speech, Lula states in a “business like tone” which differs greatly from the Freudian hysteria of her recent rant that she has “heard enough.”<sup>80</sup> The *real* Clay, the black man who harbors desire for violent vengeance, has shown his hand to Lula who now exacts her role as, in Kimberly Benston’s terms, a “femme Fatale” and, in the ultimate metaphor of phallic entry, intimately stabs Clay to death. In this sense it is his psychological racial (re?)birth that serves the justifiable cause of literal death. The suicide of the internalized Uncle Tom is traded for the murder of the self-realized Black man. It is only in Clay’s ultimate rejection of Lula and her symbolic status as a conduit of entry into white masculinity that he rejects the decadence of white male faggotry and returns to his estranged essential state of black masculinity.

Clay leads the second half of his violent diatribe by telling Lula that he “could rip her [your] lousy breasts off.”<sup>81</sup> This vivid language of sexual violence conjures a consideration of the role of sexual discourse in matters of colonial conquest and anti-colonial struggle. Specifically, returning to the previously cited quote in which Frantz Fanon, assuming a universal voice of the black colonized subject states, “when my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.”<sup>82</sup> In this quote we see the white female body articulated as candid analogy to possessed alien territory. For Fanon, a trespassing into a white male domain augments sexual pleasure. He holds her/*that* which belongs to another man/overlord. Whereas Fanon takes eroticized ownership of territory, Clay rhetorically destroys it. His generative act is that of the capacity to defile the landscape that Fanon yearns to grasp. Clay goes onto scold Lula as a “great liberated whore” whose liberal politics are fostered by her impetus to “fuck some black man.” Moreover, he says sardonically that it is sex that makes her “some expert on the black man” while in fact all she knows is that “she comes if he bangs her hard enough.”<sup>83</sup> Clay’s abjectifications of Lula as frantic figurehead of white female sexual

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Houston A. Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>80</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 36.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>82</sup> Fanon, *Black Skins*, 63.

<sup>83</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 34.

incompetence reflect back upon the white male who has sexually failed her. Moreover, he as a black man will not grant her the temporary psychical and psychological relief she finds in interracial sex. Clay's announced sexual denial enforces her linkage to a figurative racial partner whose sexual incapacity undermines her access to femininity.

Clay's final words are a rejection of Lula: "Sorry, baby, but I don't think we could make it."<sup>84</sup> However, while Lula is rejected, whiteness as a disembodied set of behaviors subject to black embodied adaptation is not. Initially in the speech, Clay says that his feeble status as a "fake middle class white man" is but a "device" of self-perseveration. Clay announces that his "pure...black beating heart" is hidden behind the "lies" of "buttoned up suits," which keep him from the messy cathartic cleansing of interracial murder. His speech verifies a desire to act on racial vengeance that is mediated through varying forms of what James Scott might call "hidden transcripts," metaphoric racial retributions that physical violence could exact with more efficiency.<sup>85</sup> However, despite these confessions, and the logic of cathartic violence on which they are grounded, Clay does not kill or sexually violate Lula. Although he "could rip her lousy breasts off" (emphasis mine), he does not. Nor does Clay kill any of the white passengers he includes in his verbal battering in an effort to make himself, or them, "sane." It is true that he speaks their death without the coded Blues or any other cryptology that serves to placate the very listener they aim to assault.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless no physical violence is enacted, only a verbalized threat and justification for prospective violence. He and they remain "safe with (his) words." In this respect it is Clay's *speech* as announcement without action that corroborates his fundamental compliance. Moreover, Clay's speech admits personal ownership of traits that would supposedly be racially/sexually compromising within Baraka schematization.

Houston A. Baker states that Clay is "shedding the bonds of Western clothing throughout the play."<sup>87</sup> That this is a gradual process "throughout the play" is in and of itself contestable. However, at the moment it will be generative to contest the fundamental position of the quote that Clay "sheds the bonds of western clothing." "Clothing" in this quote serves as a metaphor for a multitude of white/western aesthetic and ideological traits as it is paradigmatic of the popular reading of the play's climax. While there is a great deal of truth to Baker's contestation that Clay rejects his "western clothing" it is overly categorical. Clay actually lays claim to "western" thought and its artistic expression as essential to his chosen personhood. Clay's claims require a consideration of the corresponding consequences they will have on his racialized manhood.

Ultimately, Clay, exhausted by the prospect of violent retribution and the emotions of his "black pumping heart," states "ahhh shit, who needs it? I'd rather be a fool. Safe with words."<sup>88</sup> He names himself the "would be poet" and a "bastard of literature." Clay takes ownership of "western" values and desires within the context of his climatic speech. If intellectualism, poetry,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>85</sup> James Scott, *Domination and the Arts Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.)

<sup>86</sup> It is in Clay's climatic speech that the term "Blue People" is used to describe the *real* black experience. Of course, the phrasing is referential of Baraka's seminal study of African American musical tradition/aesthetic of the previous year, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*

<sup>87</sup> Houston A. Baker, *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1988), 125.

<sup>88</sup> Baraka, *Dutchman*, 35.

and the like are traits of Western racial bondage they are chosen bonds by the play's end. Clay charges the subway audience, Lula in particular, to accept and "let me be who I feel like being," an "Uncle Tom" if that is "what I want."<sup>89</sup> This conditional statement by Clay is predicated on his *choice*; he can decide to be or not be "Uncle Tom" by choice, rather than coercion. The habit of designating Clay as having achieved a state of "pure" blackness reflects a desire for a cleaner ending than is actually presented. Clay's epiphany of self-discovery includes his announcement of recoiling into qualities that would seemingly compromise his blackness within Baraka's schema.

With this in mind, it is plausible to consider that Clay is murdered not for being the avenging black man he becomes momentarily but for his refusal to be the sexually criminal black man whom Lula seeks to compel. Put more pointedly, Clay refuses Lula the primal black man she seeks to conjure in an effort to corroborate the black male rapist myth as punishable reality. As Pamela Barnett points out in her provocative study of rape and interracial desire in '60s literature, "Rape functions as a narrative violence that abrogates transgressive desire and frustrates the utopian political aspirations that underlies such desire."<sup>90</sup> However, Barnett's quote calls upon us to consider the specific utility of the threat of the black male sexual transgressor as a necessary figure in a historic continuum of white supremacy. Interracial rape, with all aforementioned anxieties and fantasies that it signifies, serves as a threat that binds white continuity to a common anxiety; in the words of Bhabha, blackness is the collective "psychic trembling of western sexuality."<sup>91</sup> The black male as interracial rapist in waiting provides a particular type of paradoxically fearful yet lustful abjection in the white psyche as both, in Scott's terms, a "repository" of sexual strength and sexual threat—i.e., that which is yearned for and yet denied—criminalized or marked as deviant. It is the threat of black male rapist that confirms the terms and functions of white female prudence and white male patriarchy; each developed, and stabilized, in tandem with the threat of black masculine sexual transgression.

Seemingly, at the play's climax, Clay would choose between the sexual/gendered death of racial obedience and a literal death that is a consequence of racial insurgence. However, the terms of obedience and insurgence have been counter-intuitively reversed: Clay is murdered for denying the serviceable black masculine threat. Clay's murder suggests that the greatest black masculine sexual threat is ironically the absence of definitive sexual threat, and the prospect of agentive choose between the emasculated white faggotry of Uncle Tom and the Black masculine. Clay's rejection of sexual transgression, his rejection of rape or at least the threat of rape (the governing ideological idiom of interracial sex within the context of white heteronormative patriarchy), disrupts his status as embodied transgressor and thus his racialized sexual functionality. This disruption threatens the fundamental terms of his utility to the preservation of white female chastity and white male social patriarchy. Clay as a black man who does not desire white women ceases to be the serviceable blackened virile threat upon which whiteness secures normativity as well as violently copes with unaddressed racialized sexual anxieties.

In this respect, black manhood, while politically feminized as incapable of the rationality required of a societal patriarch, is meant to retain a primal masculine quality. Clay's decision to remain "safe with his words" and the option of being an Uncle Tom if "he wants," as opposed to

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>90</sup> Pamela Barnett, *Dangerous Desire: Literature of Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence since the Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xv.

<sup>91</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York; Routledge Classics, 2004), 59.

being vulnerable through violence, is a tactical choice meant to safeguard Clay from legitimizing white violence upon him. However, he is killed, in such a reading, for taking just such a position. This suggests that a state of black manhood is literally unlivable in the context of Baraka's logic of authentic black masculinist identity and inauthentic Uncle Tom Negro faggotry. The conclusion of the play, in this admittedly against-the-grain reading, suggests that for whiteness the Uncle Tom, Baraka's Negro faggot, is an unnecessary, tamed, mimetic whitened male who fails to embody the chaotic boundary of violence and sex that fortifies white sexual normativity. Thus, failing to be serviceable, this figure, in this case Clay, poses a threat to the stability of the gridded landscape of race, sex, and gender on which the white patriarch is determined.



## Chapter 3

### Poems That Shoot Guns: The Masculine Crisis of Black Authorship in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*

#### Sibling Rivalry: Black Arts, Black Power and the Matter of “Action”

Formative architect of the Black Aesthetic Larry Neal famously coined the Black Arts Movement the “spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”<sup>1</sup> The language of gendered kinship between Black Power and the Black Arts Movement aptly points to the shared socio-political ambitions of Black Nationalist self-determination and mutual accountability in the realization of this ambition. Neal, in a manner nearly universally agreed upon by Black Arts theorists, insisted that Black Art was necessarily political art in the sense that literary aesthetics without the political imperative of evoking Nationalist consciousness were not *Black Arts*. Indeed, Black Art was not necessarily the byproduct of black artists but of black artists committed to art that propagated ethos of Black Power consciousness. Subsequently, the blackness of artists whose work stood outside of the political-aesthetic purview of Black Arts was, at best, in question, if not fully disavowed, as racial heresy.

As this chapter will make quite clear, BAM’s most influential and prolific voices promoted the interlocking of Black Power ethos to the aesthetic objectives of BAM. However, this relationship has stimulated a false inclination amongst critics and scholars to assume that politics usurp aesthetics. That is to say, while Black Arts Movement message and medium are interlocked they remain independent variables of a collaborative union. Each of these variables, “Black Art” and “Black Power,” were distinguishable in their respective role towards common goals.

While Neal’s statement on the relationship between Black Art and Black Power has become iconic, his word choice tellingly feminizes and disembodies Black Arts in a manner that has gone largely overlooked. Whereas Neal feminizes BAM as “sister,” he maintains the male pronoun “he” in his description of the archetypical black arts poet. In the sentence that precedes his naming of BAM as “spiritual sister of the Black Power concepts,” Neal writes: “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artists that alienates *him* from *his* community”(emphasis mine).<sup>2</sup> From the seemingly conflicting gendered designation of artists (“he”) and artistic movement (“sister”), it can be suggested that the movement, within Neal’s impactful designation, art was effeminized work being done by male workers; male artists engaging in effeminate artistry. The impact of Neal’s female gendering of BAM is doubly meaningful when it is considered in the highly masculinized characterizations of Black Power and the highly emasculated characterization of white maleness. If BAM was the “spiritual sister” then Black Power was her *corporeal brother*. And if, as Hoyt Fuller put it, the Black Power “revolt is as palpable in letters as it is in the streets” then that palpability resonated through distinctive affective registers within the realm of letters than it did in the streets.<sup>3</sup> One was the revolt of materiality, manifested as uprising, community services, self-defense, and other efforts of “on the ground” collective self-determination. The other was a revolt of identity

<sup>1</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 12. 4 (Summer, 1968): 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Hoyt Fuller, “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York; Anchor Books, 1972), 3.

formation, temperament, aesthetics, and consciousness. This chapter suggests that this distinction in revolts, despite their conjoined cause, triggered a specific anxiety around the relationship of the male Black Arts writer to his proximity to white emasculation and his distance from authentic black masculine embodiment.

It should be noted that I do not mean to suggest that BAM authors relegated their activism to the page. In fact, as texts such as *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders* and *A Nation Within a Nation* display, on the whole the BAM artists included in my consideration were heavily engaged in a multitude of forms of activism before, during and after the Black Power era.<sup>4</sup> Bracey, Smethurst, and Sanchez collaborative works specifically point to the examples of poet Amiri Baraka and Congress of African People, student of art and painter Max Stanford and the Revolutionary Action Movement, and Bobby Seale and the Black Panthers to cite the consistent role of Black Power era artists, or those with “deep background in the arts,” in leadership positions within key organizations that were not then, and historically are not now, identified as “cultural nationalists.”<sup>5</sup> I concur that a hard and fast distinction between “cultural nationalists” and “revolutionary nationalists” is, while instructive to an extent, a misleading binary.<sup>6</sup> All Black Power organizations included cultural aspects and none recognized culture and consciousness as disconnected from the radical reorienting of civil society towards the ends of black liberation. In this respect the corporeality of Black Power was related to a Black Power consciousness. Thus, the coming argument is not rooted in a contention that BAM artists were inactive in the Black Liberation Movement outside of the realm of literature. Nor am I arguing that literature is or is not in fact action in and of itself. My aim is to reveal and analyze the pervasiveness of BAM authors’ anxiety around the issue of literature as evidence of engagement in a racially and sexually compromising medium that stood outside of the masculinized corporeality that anchored key conceptions of Black authenticity.

To this point I have argued that within the Black Arts Movement the process of intraracial homosocial othering operated as the primary discourse in the production of the authentic black masculine subject. Specifically, sexuality and gender underwrote the discursive terms of racial authenticity and its necessary negation. My approach to close literary reading, which takes its orientation from the theoretical and methodological bearings of Black

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<sup>4</sup> Komazi Woodward, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Cedric Johnson, *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007). Also see, James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: African American Literary Nationalism* and Amy Ongri *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of Black Power and Search for the Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> John Jr. Bracey, James Smethurst, Sonia Sanchez, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, eds. John Bracey Jr., et. al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>6</sup> William Van Deburg’s still-essential text *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture 1965-1975* popularized the use of these categorizations. For Van Deburg’s purposes the labels are of great use and do contribute to emphasizing the important distinctions in organizational objectives. Many scholars have turned to Van Deburg’s definitional distinctions as a handy reference. Yet as scholarship on Black Arts and Black Power has evolved to stage where it is important to nuance Van Deburg’s hard categorizations.

Masculinity Studies, has suggested that the interrelatedness of racial, gender, and sexual othering is at core an outward projection of a web of internal anxieties. However, in this chapter I shift psychic vantage point to argue that around the topic of literature and the role and status of the black male author/intellectual this habitual emasculation and intraracial outcasting is inverted and manifests as *self*-contempt, or at a least angst.

It should be clear at this stage in my argument that the underlying element of Black Power/Black Arts masculinism was an anxiety to ensure a co-constitutive balance between racial authenticity and manhood. Anxieties revolving around embodying ideals of black masculinity were particularly acute for the Black Arts Movement writer. More to the point it was the medium of writing, and the position of authorship itself, that inspired a specific contour of this anxiety. Cherise Pollard has noted that Neal's "reference to the "spiritual sister" is not inherently sexist but the Black Arts Movement was riddled with sexist assumptions."<sup>7</sup> Pollard accurately locates these "sexists' assumptions" as the prevailing masculinist rhetoric of the overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, male literary voices. However, her statement can also be used to suggest the less considered topic of the gendered nature of black revolutionary action in relationship to the gendered nature of literary and intellectual production.

Performance Studies scholar Mike Sell writes that within BAM blackness was principally understood as a "critical practice to be enacted."<sup>8</sup> If this is so, as I believe it is, then determining what constituted *actions* of "critical practice" are essential to understanding achievement of black being. Conversely, in the spirit of the neurotic cat and mouse relationship of authenticity and inauthenticity, understanding the racial consequence of *inaction* reveals those "cultural practices" that un-blackened and in fact whitened and emasculated the inauthentic black subject. Specifically, it was the cultural intellectual who exercised his criticality through literature and theory who was forced to reckon with the shortcomings of his craft in relation to embodied action as the foundational determinate of black authenticity.

At the core of nearly all conceptions of BAM-era black masculinity was an emphasized engagement in direct, even confrontational, *action* with the "real world." One's engagement with the realities of life was predicated on the willing capacity to demonstrate bodily empowerment through material acts. As Cleaver and Baraka's seminal theorizations have displayed, the body was the epicenter of authentic black manhood. Conversely, intelligentsia (certainly not be confused with *intelligence*) and art were cast as realms apt to abstraction and self-indulgence—traits that wedded intellectualism and artistry to the emasculating disembodied nature of white decadency. As Stephen Best aptly summates, the realm of letters had long since been regarded as "not manly enough"—in the case of black letters, writing is perceived as an inadequate site of cultural resistance."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in the context of BAM, Art and intellectualism signaled the prospect of disconnectedness from collective black experience and alienation from the central

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<sup>7</sup> Cherise Pollard, "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 175.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Sell, *Avant-Gard Performance and Limits of Literary Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 228.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Best, "Stand By Your Man": Richard Wright, Lynch Pedagogy and Rethinking Black Male Agency," in *Representing Black Men* eds. Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham (New York: Routledge, 1996), 112.

authoritative power of manhood: the body. This binary presented a conspicuous puzzle for Black Arts theorists and authors. Indeed, Black Power/Black Arts writers promoted and claimed to embody the aforementioned standards of masculinity through a medium that innately challenged their capacity to legitimately claim such stake. In Judith Butler's parlance, this paradox makes for an unremitting site by which to consider the cyclical nature of discourses of anxiety felt by the BAM author who staged himself in the crosshairs of embodied action oriented blackness and disembodied inactive failed blackness. This chapter will explore articulations of the anxiety of black male authors' relationship to the whitened and emasculated status of western authorship in the theories and writings of the most canonical Black Arts era anthologies, *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. Going forward all primary source references will be works included in *Black Fire* unless stated otherwise.

Via analysis of a survey of works drawn from *Black Fire*, the era's most influential and lasting anthology, this chapter reads for the uncertain racial and gendered self as *acknowledged* and articulated around a consideration of the black male author as, or not as, revolutionary masculine actor. These self-referential articulations of masculine self-doubt verify a level of *conscious* anxiety that impacts the ambitions of Black Arts Masculinism at its very core. *Authorship* provides a distinctly bursting star in the constellation of black masculine anxiety semiotics as it signifies a positionality where the terms of intraracial homosocial othering are turned inward. If as Larry Neal contested the "black artists and political activists are one,"<sup>10</sup> then the slippery nature of artistic action made the union of author and activist always unsteady if not fundamentally incongruent.

### ***Black Fire: The Anthology in an Age of Anthologies***

Edited by Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* was published by William Morrow and Company (now an imprint of Harper Collins) amidst the social embers of 1968. No BAM work was as ambitious in scope, candid in objectives, and representative of the aesthetic and thematic moment in African American literature than the 680-page collection. *Black Fire* inspired and set the political and aesthetic parameters for what was, in the words of scholar Amy Ongiri, a "virtual explosion of African American literary anthology production."<sup>11</sup> In this respect, a quick note on the role of Anthology within the Black Arts era is necessary. As my ambition is to survey sentiments of racial and masculine self-doubt within Black Arts authors, the medium of anthology, and *Black Fire* in particular, allows this possibility in two key ways. Firstly, as Ongiri and others discuss, the Black Arts Movement was the golden age or, perhaps better still, the *industrial* age of black anthology, and approximately 60 were published from 1969 to 1975. A central reason for the eruption in anthology production, and subsequently its utility in my argument, is that the medium of anthology allowed a collective authorship that reflected ideals of communal participation that were in line with populist Nationalist politics that the literature served to reflect and generally promote. In this respect, anthology combats any instinct to directly identify text with a single author and replaces individual literary achievement with an emphasis on literary theme and the

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<sup>10</sup> Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," in *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, eds. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (New York; William Morrow & Company, 1968), 656.

<sup>11</sup> Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 109.

collective development of theme by collaborative authors.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, these anthologies provided a venue in which to engage in a degree of internal dialogues (“internal” categorically translated to intraracial) amongst assorted voices invested in the relationship of Black Nationalist politics to the arts and the specific political role of the black author. The format of the Black Arts era anthology, beginning with *Black Fire*, structured communal dialogue as occurring across multiple mediums including: critical and theoretical essays, short fiction, drama and most extensively poetry. Indeed, *Black Fire* remains the most expansive and illustrative example of the BAM-era anthology.

However, is *Black Fire* truly representative of the movement as a whole? It can be difficult to speak categorically about something as debated and amorphous as what constituted the Black Arts Movement. James Smethurst, in his unmatched literary history of the Black Arts Movement, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, disputes that *Black Fire* be regarded as *the* representative Nationalist anthology of the era. One of Smethurst’s main objectives, and I would add one of his great achievements, is his insistence on BAM as a heterogeneous national movement characterized by regionalized distinctions in publishing practices and aesthetic focuses. Smethurst’s literary historiography of BAM resists any tendency towards the all too common mythology in which events are catalogued as the achievements of a select few “Great Men” in favor of a vast survey of contributors that emphasizes collectives over leaders.

It is notable that Smethurst designates *Black Fire* a “seminal” text (“seminal” is, appropriately, the gendered adjective most often used by scholars to describe the significance of *Black Fire*) which announced BAM as a “national movement.” His main intervention regarding *Black Fire*’s established place as the most recognizable work of the era revolves around the terms of its publication. Smethurst contests that *Black Fire*’s relationship with this publishing house undercut its status as a “truly Black Arts Nationalist anthology” in contrast to a collection like Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press anthology *For Malcolm* published in 1969.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Smethurst’s point is semantic as it is grounded in his emphasis on nationalist literature as a practice imbricated in classic notions of national institutional infrastructure that are guided by a discernable set of shared national obligations.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, *Black Fire* was not produced by independent Black Nationalist publishers and therefore cannot be understood as fully nationalist and thus cannot be understood as representative of nationalist anthologies. Smethurst’s point is well taken and his logic, while essentially embedded in a project of literary history, recalls the tradition of Harold Cruse’s *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*; influential polemicizing of Cultural Nationalism that emphasized institution building and control of production, in this case publishing, as a pillar of nationalism. Notably, Neal and Baraka included a “note” that preceded

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<sup>12</sup> However, with the canonization of African American literature there is a suggestion that editor simply replaces author as the primary “great name” which aids the text become a “great text” rather than vice versa.

<sup>13</sup> James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: African American Literary Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 221.

<sup>14</sup> Smethurst’s essay “Let the World be a Black Poem: Some Problems of Recollecting and Editing Black Arts Texts” is a compelling piece that, among other concerns, questions the tendency of scholars to decontextualize and homogenous BAM. In part his essay is useful in considering how any anthology, or taking a direct queue from Mike Sell, perhaps any *written* text can accurately capture the dynamism of BAM.

the anthology's foreword voicing their own clear frustrations "working thru these white bullshit people."<sup>15</sup> However, ironically, it may have been the publishing agency and star status of editors Neal and Baraka (Smethurst somewhat underplays their centrality to BAM in his discussion of the text) which has contributed to *Black Fire* being the most cited and representative anthology of the time by reviewers and scholars alike. Despite the question of whether it *should* be regarded as the landmark work of BAM anthology, in realms of BAM scholarship and mainstream history of cultural production within the Black Power era, *Black Fire* is cited with overwhelming consistency as the most representative collection of Black Arts Movement literature. *Black Fire* not only set the terms structurally and thematically for the scores of anthologies that followed but also has also emerged as the most identifiable and representative collection of the Black Arts Movement.

*Black Fire* includes more than 200 primary works and its contents page reads like a roll call of the movement's most impactful literary and political voices, including: Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Stokely Carmichael, Ed Bullins, Sonia Sanchez, Sun Ra, A.B. Spellman, and Nathan Hare. Addison Gayle, forerunning theorist of Black Aestheticism, cites *Black Fire* as the work that generated tense national conversations about the literary model that BAM was introducing.<sup>16</sup> Gayle's 1972 edited collection, *The Black Aesthetic*, can be, and by the likes of Kenneth Warren and Sylvia Wynter has been, legitimately cited alongside *Black Fire* as defining the scope of African American literature in its time.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Gayle's collection cast an opaque silhouette of theoretical terms that judged Black Arts literature. Wynter states that it was the tandem of *Black Fire* and *The Black Aesthetic* that "crystallized the creative practices and dominant theoretical tendencies" of the Black Arts Movement.<sup>18</sup> However, for my purposes, while *The Black Aesthetic* serves as a valuable complementary resource to aid the theoretical bearings of my close readings, as a primary source it is limited solely to literary criticism and theory. While 182 pages of *Black Fire* is comprised of essays and theory nearly 450 pages of this massive anthology are works of poetry, drama, and short story fiction. While literary criticism and theory certainly should be understood as primary expressions of Black Aestheticism *Black Fire* provides a more comprehensive survey of literary mediums, most notably its extensive section of the periods predominant form, poetry.

*Black Fire* garnered a fair amount of interest from mainstream review outlets upon release, and certainly more than any other BAM-era anthology. By and large, reviews acknowledged the ambition but not the achievement of the anthology as an attempt, in the words of *Saturday Review* to, "illustrate the scope and vitality" of the burgeoning cohort of authors dedicated to the development of a Black Aesthetic.<sup>19</sup> The length of the anthology and copiousness of its willing contributors is routinely noted with a hint of wonder. However, despite

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<sup>15</sup> "Note to the first paperback edition of *Black Fire*," *Black Fire*.

<sup>16</sup> Addison Gayle, "Cultural Triangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," in *The Addison Gayle Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Norment Jr. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 101-107.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 161.

<sup>18</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Black Aesthetic," in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Vol 1.*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York; Oxford University Press, 1998): 96-99.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Berek, "Using Black Magic with the Words on the World," *Saturday Review* 30 Nov 1968; Vol. 51, 35.

the “enormous and revolutionary task” of the collection it did not in the eyes of mainstream reviewers achieve revolutionary ends, and instead read, in the estimation of *The New Yorker*, as a distorted “scatological” assemblage of reverse racist polemics.<sup>20</sup> However, such reviews, with a type of paternal grudgingness, acknowledged the political “militant” purview from which the works were authored. The Review in *Library Journal* notes that despite the “justified anger and politics of these young writers,” in the final analysis “shoddy writing is shoddy writing” and any potential literary merit is lost in a fog of “race-war ravings of retribution and revenge.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, *The New Yorker* added, in metaphoric prose, “The assumption that if the ship is sinking no skills are necessary.”<sup>22</sup> One reviewer from *Best Sellers* wondered if the explicit “hatred for the white man” might not have been channeled into “anger that would be more controlled and seem less vicious in other contexts.”<sup>23</sup>

The relevance of these reviews lies only partially in their overwhelmingly dismal appraisal of *Black Fire*'s literary quality and the focus on the perceived anti-whiteness of its content. Significantly, the consistency of such poor reviews would not have surprised BAM contributors; in fact, they welcomed them as confirmation of the ambitions of the collection. Despite ranges of internal debate amongst BAM theorists, they were united in a chorus that white readers, or African Americans employed by white outlets, were simply unequipped to evaluate Black aestheticism.<sup>24</sup> James Stewart's critical essay, “The Development of the Revolutionary Black Artists” anticipates and preemptively responds to *Black Fire*'s critic and his “white model”: “he” (the black artist) cannot be “successful” in any sense of that word in white critical evaluations. Nor can he ever be called “good” in any context or meaning that could make sense to that traditional critique.<sup>25</sup> Negative reviews ironically signaled the only diagnostic support the white critic could offer. All ostensibly critical blows from white critics were absorbed as verification of achieved objective. White literary critics were pundits of white literary standards and their scolding critiques reflected an incongruence of *Black Fire* works with the white literary standard. Indeed, the white literary critics' evaluation suggested lack of comprehension that in turn served as evidential authentication of the arts' “blackness.” The reviewers' capacity for critique aside, the fact that *Black Fire* was reviewed by the likes of *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Saturday Review* indicates that *this* anthology was an available and palpable voice to the National mainstream speaking from what was otherwise a distant militant margin.

As evidenced in these initial reviews, as well as the preliminary scholarship, *Black Fire* has been largely remembered as representative of a pervasive anti-whiteness within Black Power. However, scholarship on *Black Fire* and its status as representative of the Black Arts era has pivoted on these foundational receptions and moved into new interpretations. This shift comes most pointedly in Phillip Brian Harper's indispensable, “Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960's.” As noted in Chapter 1, Harper argues that while “anti-white”

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<sup>20</sup> “Briefly Noted: General” *The New Yorker* Dec 1968; vol 44, 250.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Marolies, review of *Black Fire: an Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, *Library Journal* Jul 1968; Vol. 93, 2659.

<sup>22</sup> “Briefly Noted: General,” *The New Yorker*, 250.

<sup>23</sup> *Best Sellers: The Semi Monthly Book Review*, 15 November 1968; Vol. 28, No. 16 349.

<sup>24</sup> Addison Gayle, “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, 2nd ed., ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 38-46.

<sup>25</sup> James Stewart, “The Development of the Revolutionary Black Artists,” in *Black Fire*, 6.

sentiment was pervasive its explicitness acts as a dazzling veneer that overwhelms crucial intraracial tensions. Likewise, in a manner that has greatly inspired this dissertation, Harper argues that intraracial divisions draw on masculinity as the primary barometer to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic blackness. This evaluation pertains specifically to Harper's close readings of BAM poetry style of address in a series of key BAM poems, a number of which appear in *Black Fire*. Harper concludes that despite the propagation of racial solidarity and Nationalist politics the Black Arts poet consistently writes with an "I vs. you" sort of disputation of what he calls "blacker than thou(ness)."<sup>26</sup> "I" being the racially authentic black masculine author and "you" being the racially failed emasculated audience.<sup>27</sup>

In her stellar interdisciplinary study of Black Power cultural production, *Spectacular Blackness*, Amy Ongiri picks up on Harper's emphasis on racial authenticity as both tantamount to, and conflicting with, BAM rhetoric of black solidarity. Ongiri acknowledges Harper's valuable insight regarding the centrality of intraracial divisiveness. Yet Ongiri deviates from Harper's emphasis on hyper masculine sexuality as the focal premise of intraracial divisiveness. Ongiri, via close readings of poetry and essays from *Black Fire*, contests that class politics represented the central theme of divisiveness. Ongiri draws on a survey of prose to illustrate how racial authenticity was the monopoly of the folk masses and the "Negro elite," or middle class, were compromised by their token inclusion in the white establishment. Ongiri points to reoccurring rhetorical attacks on the middle class as a pervasive theme of intraracial conflict.<sup>28</sup>

The relative insights of Harper and Ongiri act as complementary exponents of the same equation. One of *Black Fire's* running contentions is that middle-class life served as a site where black emasculation was fostered. The conditions of middle-class living, in their replication of the whitened standard, produce a state of sexualized identity that requires that the virility of blackness be curtailed and potentially extinguished. Calvin Hernton states, in a manner that parallels Baraka's claim of white "trained fags," that the "middle class Negro child is trained to be a sissy."<sup>29</sup> Or as Reginald Lockett's addition to the anthology phrases it: the ostensibly Europeanized cultured black male has been "conditioned to be a faggot" or "pervert" by the "same old ritual" of "sissified" white education. Specifically, according to Lockett, it was the willingness to study classical composers via self-indulgent summers in Europe that suggests black male faggotry is as mimetic process of supposed high culture.<sup>30</sup> Lockett and Hernton's view of the black middle class as enduring the pathologizing *process* of whiteness and its effeminizing quality via sites of culture resonates with a reoccurring theme in *Black Fire*.

After acknowledging each of these as invaluable scholarship that point to pivotal themes in my consideration of the anthology, I contest that themes of anti-whiteness, homosociality, and classism do not operate independently but rather inform one another. Specifically, each pivots on Harper's notion of the fully black (that is, uncompromised in sexuality or class) authorial "I" speaking *to* and *about* the not fully black (emasculated or elitist) audience of "you."<sup>31</sup> However, when one alters the nature of this literary transaction in a manner that emphasizes the rhetorical

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<sup>26</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 117-123.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin Hernton, "Dynamite Growing out of Their Skulls," in *Black Fire*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Reginald Lockett, "DIE BLACK PERVERT," in *Black Fire*, 354-355.

<sup>31</sup> Harper, *Are We Not Men*, 47-49.



speech of an author by locating instances in which their prose is directed toward the self, or directed broadly to the category of black author/intellectual, a figurative “I,” these seemingly distinct categories of projected racial failure coalesce into a new category of self-doubting *authorship*. In short, rather than looking for “I” speaking to “you” texts it is important to locate “I” speaking to “I” or “I” speaking to “we/us” texts. This critical move leads to interpretative readings of self-doubt regarding one’s status as a black male author. The following example will illustrate the critical value of such interpretation.

### **Live Words: *Black Fire* and the Making of Active Literature**

Perhaps no work of the Black Arts Movement, let alone *Black Fire*, is more infamous and polarizing than Baraka’s aptly titled poem, “Black Art.” The notorious status of this poem is rooted in its supposedly confessional nature of violent motivations of Black Power that seemed to always hover around the twinning of the words, *Black* and *Power* in so many American, especially white American, psyches. In other words, the poem was frightening or inspiring depending upon who was reading/listening because it announced impending *actions* of black insurgence. However, it is the threat *of the poem* itself, rather than the events it might prophesize, which directs our attention to the telling tension between revolutionary action, literary expression and black masculinity for the Black Arts author. As it appears in *Black Fire*, the most famed lines of “Black Art” read:

We want “poems that kill.”  
Assassin poems, poems that shoot  
guns.<sup>32</sup>

David Lionel Smith points out the majority of initial considerations of BAM by scholars and critics have been absorbed in “arguing for or against” its politics.<sup>33</sup> This poem was certainly a favorite of the “against” bloc. Cited as evidentiary of the supposedly riotous spirit of the Black Power era, the poem was characterized as promoting a discriminatory and violent agenda grounded at a cross-section of nihilism and essentialism. Richard H. King summates the position well: “It is difficult to know how to react to such lines, except to be dumbstruck by the moral vulgarity and the coarseness of spirit informing them.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Baraka biographer Jerry Watts deems the poem to reflect Baraka as “pathological” and an illustration of his personally

<sup>32</sup> Leroi Jones, “Black Art,” in *Black Fire*, 302-303.

<sup>33</sup> Lionel David Smith, “The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics,” *American Literary History* 3.1 (Spring 1991). Smith called for more rigors and objective scholarly attention to be paid to BAM. Fortunately, less explicitly partisan work has come forth as the scholarship on the period has developed. However, even amongst scholars of the highest caliber there does remain a tinge of binarism between antagonism and defensiveness regarding the “success” of the movement. For instances in the 1995 *Time* article “Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge” Henry Louis Gates referred to BAM as “the shortest and least successful African American literary movement,” (75). On the other hand, James Smethurst, Sonia Sanchez, and John Bracey’s collaborative Black Arts Movement reader, *S.O.S.-Calling All Black People*, states “BAM was arguably the most influential U.S arts movement ever,” (8).

<sup>34</sup> Richard King, *Race, Culture, And The Intellectuals, 1940-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 288.

“warped Logic.”<sup>35</sup> Readings like King’s or Watts’ designate the poem as polemic as much as, arguably more than, a work of literary aestheticism. *Perhaps* it’s hard not to. Indeed it would seem that Baraka asked for such evaluations by insisting upon the notion that *true* Black art is inseparable from the lived reality of blackness. Furthermore, the threat of the word was to be considered a syntactical reverberation of the physical threat of the hand that penned it. However, for now what is relevant is that for the critic the poem and its poet seemingly merge as indecipherable as a consequence of the poem’s content. It is the personal “spirit” of the poet (subjective denunciations of the “vulgarity” or “pathological” nature of this spirit aside) that resonates in each threatening word of the poem. However, a closer look at the language of the verse reveals the conflation of poet and poem to be a guided by a hasty, and perhaps misleading, impulse.

A telling semiotic nuance of “Black Art” is that Baraka calls for *poems* and not *poets* that will “shoot guns”; demanding “*Poems* that kill” rather than poets that kill. While poets are to author these violent “live words” there is no mention in the poem that they will partake in violence literally. It would seem that affronted readers such as those that Smith alludes to, in a fit of defensiveness or fear, couldn’t distinguish between the poem and the poet. This indistinction bespeaks one of the poem’s greatest peculiarities: *it* (poem) manifests as a *subject* (poet). More pointedly, the self-proclamation of being a black *it* (a black poem) results in a metamorphosis into a black subject (black poet). William Cox and Werner Sollers have pointed out this merging of word and wordsmith signals a success of achieved effect for Baraka. Poems were heard/read as posing immediate physical impact rather than as a medium that *spoke* of itself, or even more distantly spoke of prospective poem that “we want,” as posing immediate danger. Baraka’s poem seeks to achieve Larry Neal’s primary desire that poetry be a “concrete function, an action. No more abstractions. Poems are physical entities...”<sup>36</sup>

However, Baraka’s language choice of *poems* rather than *poets* that shoot guns serves as evidential of a critical theoretical paradox, and matching racial anxiety, implicit in Black Arts work. To my reading, the selection of *poem* over *poet* cannot be regarded as merely a semantic oversight but rather a key moment in which the ambition of BAM production as social action meets head on with the racialized and gendered restrictions that writing supposedly posed and signaled. While the written word was meant to be a revolutionary action it also served as the author’s announcement of physical action deferred. In other words, the violence of the *poem* is the paper trail of the inactivity of the *poet*. Baraka’s murderous words in “Black Art” are proof that he is not, at least at present, killing anybody. Thus, this literary evidence of physical inaction announced a physical displacement from masculinist black revolutionary action. While Baraka proposes a resolution of sorts this announcement was made in the ostensible playgrounds of emasculating Western abstraction—literature.

As explained in the previous chapter in the context of Baraka’s reticence towards “western” literary abstractions of symbolism and metaphor, the governing ideology of Black Arts characterized white literature as lifelessly immaterial and both representative and contributory to white estrangement from the realities of the body. Furthermore, as previously noted, it is the estrangement from bodily reality that supposedly caused the sexual devolution of the white male as, in Baraka’s words a “trained fag.” However, it was not only the alienating

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<sup>35</sup> Werner Sollers, *Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones: The Quest for a Populist Modernism* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1978), 150.

<sup>36</sup> Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 29.

effects of the technological world of “button pushing” but also the abstracted spirit of western philosophical thought and its corresponding aesthetics that served to emasculate the white male. The decadence of white male experience was legible in the unreality of white literature and further alienated the white mind from the white body, and thus the white race further from the bodily essence of manhood. Art, primarily literature, was recognized as aesthetic evidence of masculine incapacitation. As Hoyt Fuller states, the Black Arts writer is “not going to separate literature from life”;<sup>37</sup> this distinctly black interrelationship of life and letters implies the fundamental rejection lifeless white literature. Charged as “art for art’s sake,” which didn’t *do* anything, white literature produced nothing literal for it was grounded in the abstraction of white male unreality. In sum, it was argued that literature in and of itself was not necessarily white or emasculated but had long been the domain of an emasculated white intelligentsia and had impeded its effective adaptation as a means of action for black writers.

Within what Douglass Taylor usefully names the Black Arts era “semiotic grid” which fundamentally interlocked race, gender, and sexuality, “western art,” like homosexuality (see chapter 1) or interracial heterosexual partnering (see chapter 2), can be read as a sign of distancing from the corporeality that ostensibly grounds masculine selfhood. Comparable to Black Arts characterizations of homosexuality as symptomatic of mannish alienation, “western art” signaled a corresponding practice of the sullied male psyche of the bourgeois white man. Yet, art as a *non-sex* act signifies a distinct expression of so-called whitened faggotry that is legible outside of the realm of the erotic but is named through language carrying erotic implication. In other words, it is not that art is sexual per se but rather that terms and corresponding language for judging how art is made, and towards what ends it is made, are congruent with the terms of male incapacitation that structure the critical vocabularies of racial failure. Thus, art intersects with whiteness at the concentric rhetorical sign of the “faggot” as the term that describes one’s agentive stake in participating in white male emasculative “training.” Therefore, the Black Arts artists must contend with art’s association with white faggotry. The black male artists, while unable to phenotypically become white, can become white in mind and spirit, and art may signal such a process. As noted by James Stewart in the essay “The Development of the Revolutionary Black Artists,” art must be made distinguishably “nonwhite” in order to avoid associated meaning with the always-whitened nature of faggotry.<sup>38</sup>

In this respect the black literary tradition was often taken to task for falling victim to the failing standards of white intellectualism and all of its emasculated notoriousness. As Nathan Labrie’s essays put it, the “new breed” of black men is “creating new mores, new folks ways” yet they must first “vomit up” the old ways.<sup>39</sup> The new Black Arts thinker was not only victim of white literary mis-education but also more acutely an inheritor of a whitened black literary tradition. Namely, The Harlem Renaissance, while generally regarded as the forefather of BAM, was recurrently cited as a “failed” aesthetic-political movement. In the Oedipal literary tradition, BAM seemed compelled to figuratively kill their literary father. The Black Arts Movements gospel of subaltern reality came in the wake of what Larry Neal called the “fantasy era for black writers and their white friends” that “never existed for the people of the community.”<sup>40</sup> Despite lionizing many of the specific works of the period as illustrating great African American literary

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<sup>37</sup> Hoyt Fuller, “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” in *Black Aesthetic*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> James Stewart, “The Development of The Black Revolutionary Artist,” in *Black Fire*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Labrie, “The New Breed,” in *Black Fire*, 65-78.

<sup>40</sup> Larry Neal, “And Shine Swam On,” in *Black Fire*, 650.

talents (for instance Jean Toomer's *Cane* was held in high acclaim), the movement as a whole was routinely criticized. Following the formative critiques of Harold Cruse—whose contribution to *Black Fire*, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” issues a sort of truncated version of his seminal thesis in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*—the Harlem Renaissance was said to have depended upon white patronage, dangerously allied to white communists, and was perhaps most damningly unable or uninterested in reaching common black people.<sup>41</sup>

With such critiques of the emasculating effects of white literature, the “quest for a literary Black Aesthetic” constituted as “a set of rules by which black literature and art can be judged and evaluated” was grounded on shaky terrain.<sup>42</sup> The first objective, and ultimately the most challenging, was to develop an aesthetic that retained the immediacy and literal physical experience supposedly innate to authentic black life. This conundrum was recognized and addressed as central to the project of the Black Aesthetic itself. In this respect, the groundwork was in denouncing and distancing of white literature. Larry Neal, in the movement's unofficial manifesto, suitably titled “The Black Arts Movement,” states that this definitively racialized and latently gendered western aesthetic was incongruent with the political objective and literary styling of the Black Arts. Similar to the collaborative scholarship of Smethurst, Bracey, and Sanchez, Lionel Smith correctly concludes “there was no agreement on the meaning of the term” Black Aesthetic.<sup>43</sup> However, the introduction to *The Black Aesthetic* asserts Black Arts are meant to be “corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism.”<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, defining and interrogating a white literary tradition and paradigm in all its ostensible crippling decadence was not sufficient. To paraphrase Black Aesthetic theorist Julian Mayfield: explaining what the black aesthetic was *not* was much easier than saying what it *is*.<sup>45</sup>

The Black Aesthete found himself in a double bind; first was the task of writing in a manner that did not fall victim to the failing paradigms of white standards, and thus avoiding the racially crippling effects of white American pathology. Such a task was shadowed by a seemingly unshakable haunting of white influence implicit in the usage of the English language, the written word, and the national purview from which BAM authors wrote. As Ralph Ellison

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<sup>41</sup> The fact that, as Henry Louis Gates puts it in his essay “The Black Man's Burden,” the Harlem Renaissance was “surely as gay as it was black” suggests a provocative element of the BAM's disavowal of the Harlem Renaissance that, while never explicitly pronounced (at least in my findings), would fit neatly in my broader considerations regarding the concentricity of sexual and literary intraracial othering. While the rejection of the Harlem Renaissance was specifically articulated as the rejection of aesthetic responses to political problems such judgment also cast away less curtailed gender/sexual possibilities available in the witting of the likes of McKay, Thurman, Nugent etc. Part of BAM's casting aside the Harlem Renaissance was the casting aside of alternative conceptions of manhood to the circumscribed ideals of BAM. The specifics of this underlying antagonism towards the Harlem Renaissance are something I plan to pursue elsewhere at a later time.

<sup>42</sup> Gayle, “Cultural Strangulation,” 36.

<sup>43</sup> Bracey, Smethurst, and Sanchez present a comparable position in their co-authored introduction the edited volume *S.O.S Calling All Black People*.

<sup>44</sup> Addison Gayle, introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, xx.

<sup>45</sup> Julian Mayfield, “You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, 23-31.

and Albert Murray argued, the “Americanism” that BAM theorized as a whitened state of being not only pursued but shaped the African *Americanness* of blackness.<sup>46</sup> Emily Bernard has usefully articulated BAM’s crafting of a distinctly black aesthetic as haunted by a “white specter” of ideological and literary influence that threatened to decay the vivacity of the Black Arts objective.<sup>47</sup> To postulate the idea of the Black Nation as *within* but not *of* the Nation produced the dilemma of cultural overlaps and interrelatedness that, in this context, impinged upon the autonomy of black identity and literary expression. In this respect the conundrum was one of producing literature that was distinctly active in its blackness, rather than willingly passive like the abstracted nature of white literature. Bernard’s specter looms large at this site of impasse. The critical centrality of Baraka’s phrasing “live words” (lines 8-9 of “Black Art”) was the consequence of the masculinized and racially authenticating notion of direct revolutionary action that Black Power ethos and rhetoric aggrandized. Resolving this problem was easier said, or better yet *written*, than done.

BAM had produced for itself a snare in which the literary medium of radicalism was tethered to evidence of emasculated and thus racially failed inactivity. The more one contested the more stuck one becomes. In my reading, *the* central paradox for Black Arts writers was that they wrote within and in fact contributed to authoring a paradigm that entailed their exclusion from its primary assertion regarding black manhood. Writing was evidence of not *doing* that which one was writing about. Thus emerges the question of impact of ideologies and agendas of Black Power when transmitted through literary form. The reason a question emerges here is a consequence of perpetuated notions of the emasculation, particularly as a characteristic of whiteness, of abstraction from the material world. Art, primarily literature, was evidence of alienation, a paper trail of emasculating decadence.

Poet K. William Kgositsile approaches that taut knotting of occupational limits that Baraka’s “Black Art” attempts to slip with a telling difference in his poem “Towards a Walk in the Sun.” Where Baraka attempts to give masculine physicality to his poem, Kgositsile initially reaches this position by accusing poetry of being unable to address the physical realm and its centrality to black suffering. He writes,

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<sup>46</sup>The rightful claim to American identity for black people and the blackness of American identity are foundational premises for both Murray and Ellison throughout their careers as fiction authors and cultural/literary critics. In the case of their respective commentaries on Black Arts and on the role of “protest” or “sociological” literature in general useful texts include Murrays polemic *Omni-Americans*, Ellison’s collected essays in *Shadow and Act*, “The World and the Jug” and his review of, then, Leroi Jones’s *Blue People* titled “Blues People” each exist as works that reveal Ellison’s concern regarding the emphasize of politics over art for any writer. While “The World and the Jug” directly responds to literary critic Irving Howe its featured argument revolves around a critique of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* that tellingly foreshadows a resentful skepticism of the relationship between literature and political orientation of BAM and by extension BAM’s tendency to frame Wright as literary model.

<sup>47</sup> Notably, Bernard’s terrific essay extends this notion to argue that BAM notions of blackness required whiteness as a referential counter-point of revocation despite claims of ridding the self, and world, of whiteness. Emily Bernard, “A Familiar Strangeness: The Spectre of Whiteness in the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Power Movement*, eds. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Crawford (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 255-273.

what does my hunger  
Have to do with a gawdamm poem?<sup>48</sup>

Kgositsile's question regarding the impact that poetry can have on the immediate concerns of nourishment conjures looming concerns about the immaterial nature of art in the face of the immediate physical perils of black life. The mildly profane vernacular phrasing of "gawdamm poem" suggests not only the urgency of hunger but also a specifically folk frustration with literature as an ineffective and foreign mode of remedy. Furthermore, "*my* hunger" (emphasis mine) implies a narrative voice shift from first person to third person in the schema of the poem that suggests Kgositsile temporarily assuming the voice of a skeptical poor African American querying the poet. However, Kgositsile quickly shifts into a first person narration that addresses the urgent concern of the questioner—the agitated and hungry folk. Kgositsile attempts to reconcile the incapacity of a poem to impact one's physical condition by approaching from the opposite direction from Baraka, writing: "When the moment hatches in the time's womb there will be no art talk. The only poem you will hear will be the spear point pivoted in the punctured marrow of the villain"<sup>49</sup>

The sexual undertones of blackness's relationship to authorship glare in the word choice in this section. The phallic spear point replaces the feminized ballpoint. Lisa Gail Collins plainly states that for some prominent BAM writers "the phallus is the ultimate weapon."<sup>50</sup> Here Kgositsile leverages phallic imagery to weaponize the imagined poem of insurgency. The author of the poem, who at present is engaged in the passive act of writing or "art talk," will *write* no more poems and engage as the active masculine agent of black liberation; clearly a job for the spear not a pen. Ironically, it is birth, ultimately solely the act of a woman, that will figuratively spawn the masculine actor whose lyrical "spear thrusting" will usurp the passivity of "art talk."<sup>51</sup> It is from feminized "time's" maternal "womb" that the insurgent act of violent penetration necessarily comes to bear.<sup>52</sup> Kgositsile repeals Baraka's leading *poem as action* paradigm with these lines by relegating art back the passive act of "talk." He revokes the figurative "poem that shoots guns," or in this case poems that thrust spears, in favor of the claim that the literal act of wielding a spear into the flesh of the enemy will itself be poetic. Poetic violence replaces violent poems. Furthermore, this will be "the *only* poem" (emphasis mine) one hears insinuating an expiration of literary poetry as a consequence of the beginning of black liberatory action. If the poem's function was to catalyze action, then manifestation of action seems to render its inspirer unnecessary.

This poem inverts Baraka's formulation in "Black Art" by esteeming revolutionary action as poetry while calling into question literary poetry as action. However, the paradox of this interpretation is that these claims are being made in a poem! Thus, the critique of poetry ventriloquized by the poet in the form of first person folk questioning, "what does my hunger have to do with a gawdamm poem" boomerangs back into a question for the ventriloquist who is himself, of course, one of the class to whom his own question is posed. In other words, what does *his* poem have to do with *their* hunger? The answer is the poet's awareness of his medium's

<sup>48</sup> William Kgositsile, "Towards A Walk in the Sun," in *Black Fire*, 229.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

<sup>50</sup> Pollard, "Sexual Subversion," 177.

<sup>51</sup> Kgositsile, "Towards A Walk in the Sun," 229.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

limitation for the needs of his audience (of which his language asserts a curious inclusion and exclusion from) as well as the ultimate transition into masculine violence.

The direction of Kgositsile's concluding address, "the only poem *you* will hear..." is emblematic of the fissure between artists and audience that BAM authors anxiously stressed and attempted to suture. The gulf between artists and audience is consistently explored across the works of *Black Fire*, most explicitly in the anthology's essay section. Performance of written text on street corners or community auditoriums as well as coffee houses or theatres, in order to reach those less inclined to buy poetry books, were consistently proposed remedies to close the gap between writer and reader.<sup>53</sup> Mike Sell asserts that BAM "discovered the soul of black liberation in the deconstruction and partial rejection of the art object and literary text."<sup>54</sup> The emphasis on performance and orality by performance scholars such as Lorenzo Thomas and Meta DuEwa Jones certainly buttresses Sell's claim.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the "rejection of text" is featured in *Black Fire's* theoretical essays that primarily stage art as a propagandistic conduit to directly engage an audience's political consciousness. A.B. Spellman's essay suggests poetry as written "permanent record" does not supply lasting life to the words but drains it of the freewheeling "body" of jazz and blues performance.<sup>56</sup> Neal adds that black writers' penchant for the sonic has been stymied because black poets have been "tied to the texts, like white poets."<sup>57</sup> The inclination for performance over written text was urged by the supposed pragmatism of "bringing the art to the people."<sup>58</sup> However, the preference for performance was underwritten by the disembodied nature of writing and its role in the broader system of white physical alienation from the self versus the embodied action, and thus blacker nature, of performance. There is a notable paradox in the investment in a value system that sought to displace the written word as the pinnacle of literary achievement that utilized the written word to articulate this position. In this respect, Sell refers to

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<sup>53</sup> For more on this assumption, see Margo Crawford, "Textual Production of Black Aesthetics Unbound," in *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race Since 1850*, ed. George Hutchinson and John Young (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 188-210.

<sup>54</sup> Sell, *Avant-Gard Performance*, 58.

<sup>55</sup> See Meta DuEwa Jones's chapter, "A Cave Continuum or a Dark Room Renaissance? From Jazz Improvisation to Hip Hop Stylization in Contemporary Black Poetry" in *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), and Lorenzo Smith's essay "Neon Griot: The Functional Role of Poetry reading in the Black Arts Movement," included in Charles Bernstein edited collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> A.B. Spellman, "Not Just Whistling Dixie," in *Black Fire*, 165.

<sup>57</sup> Neal, "And Shine Swam On," 651.

<sup>58</sup> If replacing the stagnation of white written language with the vivaciousness of black performance was the proposed means of transforming the artists into activist than musicians served the primary muses of this possibility. Neal and Stewart respectively address this topic by calling upon African American musicians as the highest order of achievement in back art. Neal explains, "the poet must become a performer, the way James Brown is performer...He must bring his work where the people are ...link the work to all usable aspects of music...the poet must learn to sing (653)." Calling back to my reading of Baraka's language choice, but turning it on its head, for Neal, it is "the poet" not his poem, in his performance of the poem, that is active.

BAM as a “textually supported anti-textual movement.”<sup>59</sup> To put it another perhaps less generous way, the fictional prose included in *Black Fire* serve as evidence of the theory of literary displacement in motion as well as evidence of its relative incompleteness. For we are of course reading these works in *Black Fire*, not hearing them or seeing them.<sup>60</sup> The responsibilities of the literary herald of black active writing occurred behind enemy lines and this came with a degree of racial and gendered transmutation.

Clearly, the responsibility of BAM authors as agents of revolution was an explicit topic. However, the ever-present possibility of failure to uphold this responsibility existed as a type of dormant accusation always primed to spring. While theorists discussed and imagined they had resolved the classic query of “the role of the black writer,” the failures of other black writers remained a featured mode of self-protection from lurking accusations of elitism and cowardice. The non-Black Arts black writer was an available divertive scapegoat who evidenced emasculative traits of racial inauthenticity. As Emily Bernard’s fine essay “A Familiar Strangeness” puts it, the black writer who embodied the “white spectre” of artistic sensibility was most viciously attacked as the personification of emasculated racial traitor.<sup>61</sup> While white artistry was the articulation of the pathos of whiteness’s faggotry it was those black artists who personified the white literary standard whose faggotry served to buffer the Black Arts writer from his own relationship to the pitfalls of authorship.

Weldon Smith’s lengthy poem, “Special Section for the Niggas on the Lower Eastside or: Invert the Divisor and Multiply” charges faux black artists/intellectual as “mercenary frauds” and “jive revolutionaries” whose literature imitates white male standards of “downtown” literary bohemian hipness out of a desire to “become white.”<sup>62</sup> Their replication of whiteness is evidenced through the “existential, jive ass explanations” of their intellectual and artistic recitals.<sup>63</sup> These “deranged imitators” are token blacks’ voices placating the racial sensibilities of audiences of ostensibly liberal urbanites. Thus, the phenotypical blackness of these figurative

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<sup>59</sup> Mike Sell, “Ed Bullins as Editorial Performer: Textual Power and the Limits of Performance in the Black Arts Movement,” *Theatre Journal* 53.3 (October 2001): 418.

<sup>60</sup> This is not to say one cannot see or hear Black Arts works, but rather they are not as readily available. Recorded speeches, spoken work or jazz themed album was featured medium of Black Arts poetry, Pat Thomas’s book *Listen Whitey: The Sounds of Black Power, 1965-1975* chronicles the importance of sonic recordings. Also, see Stuart Baker’s *Black Fire! New Spirit: Images of Revolution: Radical Jazz in the USA 1960-75*. Seeing Black Arts performance can be bit more difficult as video recording was frequent a practice and far less available. However, the books like Gayle Wald’s *It Been Beautiful Soul! And Black Power Television* and Devorah Heitner’s *Black Power TV* represent an exciting move towards considering the role of public television as a medium for artistry and politics during the Black Power era. California Newsreel’s *Black Theatre: Making of a Movement* provides compelling visual recordings of participants in the Black Arts theatre scenes. Finally, California Newsreel has, at the time of this writing, just released *BaddDD Sonia Sanchez*, a film that seems like it will likely break new ground in granting visuals to Black Arts poetry.

<sup>61</sup> Emily Bernard, “A Familiar Strangeness: The Spectre of Whiteness in the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Power Movement*, 255-273.

<sup>62</sup> Weldon Smith, “Special Section for the Niggas on the Lower Eastside or: Invert the Divisor and Multiply,” in *Black Fire*, 287-289.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 288.



authors and the curbing of their supposed threat as males is that which granted them access to white bohemian circles. For Smith such replications of white expression and placating aims are categorized as the pathologically and manic act of “deranged punks lapping in the ass of the beast.”<sup>64</sup> Smith describes the anus as the site of white beastly hedonism drawing pleasure from black emasculation. Or, conversely, he uses the anus as representative of the broader spectrum of subordinations inflicted upon tokenized black artists. Compare Smith’s line to Calvin Hernton’s “Jitter Buggin in the Streets” in which Hernton explains the experience of black suffering as “terror that shakes the foundation of the very assholes of the people.”<sup>65</sup> The black “asshole” is the ultimate, “foundation(nal)” embodied site of coerced white terror. The now-familiar logic of the relationship between racial traitorousness and voluntary emasculation, and its corresponding implications of interracial sexuality, receives an important twist in Smith’s poem. For here it is the occupational tendencies of the black *writer* that serve as a grounding site of the interlockage of racial and masculine failure. Accordingly, black imitation of white expression serves as a site of reference from which the corresponding associations of emasculation spring.

Smith issues metaphoric homoeroticism as the means of rhetorically lampooning the bookish Uncle Tom.<sup>66</sup> However, Smith does so alongside a seemingly inconsistent emphasis on the ravenous interracial heterosexual desire of the accused black writer. As Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman has explored, the collapsing of twin nationalist taboos of interracial heterosexual desire and homosexuality denote their ostensible commonality as illustrative of betrayal of the racial collective as well as willful alienation from racial selfhood.<sup>67</sup> Smith’s “slobbering punk” whose intellectual expressions are akin to degraded participation in interracial homosexual anilingus, is also apparently “devouring every cunt in every garbage can on avenue a and b in an effort to find an ideal white woman”<sup>68</sup>—the specificity of the location “avenue a and b” is yet another allusion to the New York “downtown” bohemian scene that featured the figure of the wantonness white women such as Lula in *Dutchman*. Recall, it has been established within this ideological matrix that the claiming of a white women as a sexual partner is the seminally valued object of homosocially legible patriarchy. However, echoing the nexus of transracializing and transgendering of Clay in *Dutchman*, Smith suggests that this figure doesn’t just “want a white woman but you (they) want to *be* a white women” (Emphasis mine).<sup>69</sup> Again, the suggestion that sexual desire for white women represents the desire to embody white manhood as well as the yearning to be effeminized in relation to the white man, i.e. “the beast.” The seemingly paradoxical nature of this pairing, both man and women, is resolved by a shared correlation to white maleness as faggotry. However, where in the case of Clay his interracial sexual yearning was the lynchpin of his racial and masculine heresy Smith’s poem redirects attention to sexualized undertones of the white racialization of authorship for the black writer.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 288.

<sup>65</sup> Calvin Hernton, “Jitterbuggin in the Streets,” in *Black Fire*, 205.

<sup>66</sup> *Black Fire* poems such as Stanley Crouch’s “Blackie Thinks of His Brother”, Bob Bennett’s “It’s time for action” and Reginald Lockett “DIE BLACK PERVERT” each feature comparable figures to the one found in Smith’s poem whose black emasculation is made legible by association with white bohemia and adoption of white thought and expression.

<sup>67</sup> Aliyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotic’s of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 82-113.

<sup>68</sup> Weldon Smith, “Special Section,” in *Black Fire*, 288.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 288.

Smith's figure is associated with a specific white artistic scene of the so-called bohemian hipster usually associated with the Beat generation and New York's Greenwich Village. Ted Wilson's poem "Count Basies" describes this artistic scene as a collection of depraved "bourgeois slicksters/ prostitutes with degrees/zanzy faggots/Hip white boys" who travel uptown in search of black sonics and flesh.<sup>70</sup> Smith, Wilson, and numerous others posit white "bohemian" male writers as fetishizing the black male in their literature.<sup>71</sup> The contemporary scholarship of David Savran, Douglass Taylor, and Daniel Kim have explored the bohemian as one oriented by a desire for black masculinity with a yearning to access an essence of virile male experience solely available to black men.<sup>72</sup> Their want is not understood to manifest as a literal sexual act or *explicit* sexual desire but rather as a type of blundering cultural mimesis or voyeurism.

It is the white hipster writing style and/or literary articulations of esteemed black manhood rather than their sex acts that illustrates the distinct realization of *their* faggotry. Taylor points to Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, Norman Mailer's *The White Negro*, as well as conservative Beat critic Norman Podhoretz's "My Negro Problem—And Ours," as three prime examples of texts that reflect Beat Generation authors fearful yet longing construction of black manhood.<sup>73</sup> Via Freud, Kim, citing Kerouac and Mailer specifically, designates black masculinity as the "sexual object" mediating the bohemian desire for particularized manhood, but not black men as subjects of bohemian "sexual aim."<sup>74</sup> Kim names this distinct character the white "faggot-artist" (as opposed to the white homosexual, whom he calls "the proper-faggot" of Black Arts Movement) and points us back to the elasticity of the phrasing to stretch sexuality as a descriptive means to evaluate the racial failure of men beyond the erotic. Comparably, for the *black* "faggot-artist" as exemplified by Smith's caricaturing, homosexuality is the explanatory metaphor chosen to describe the figure's relationship to a broader system of white hegemony, i.e., "the beast." It is this black artist's willingly deferential and degraded engagement with the idioms of the white artistic vanguard that Smith and Lockett make legible through homophobic language. Indeed, this figure is posited as faggot not in spite of his heterosexuality but in large

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<sup>70</sup> Ted Wilson, "Count Basie's," in *Black Fire*, 199.

<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the likes of Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer and William Styron are mentioned explicitly as exemplifying this type in Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic*. Furthermore, and quite ironically, these BAM formulations follow the lead of one of their primary targets, James Baldwin. Baldwin wrote at length about white bohemian fetishization of blackness, and black men in particular, in his piercing 1961 essay on friend/rival Norman Mailer, "The Black Boy Look at the White Boy" (this essay also includes a shorter critique of Kerouac on similar grounds). However, unlike Smith, Wilson and other BAM authors Baldwin does not use homophobic rhetoric to critique bohemian authors.

<sup>72</sup> See, Daniel Kim, *Writing manhood in black and yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the literary politics of identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.), <sup>72</sup> Douglas Taylor, "Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer and Eldridge Cleaver on Race and Masculinity," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 52.1 (Spring 2010): 70-101. David Savran, *Takin it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> Taylor, "Three Lean Cats," 97.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel Kim, *Writing manhood in black and yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the literary politics of identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.), 21.

part due to it (!) as interracial heterosexual sex is evidence of the true ambition of contribution to this particular intellectual/artistic network.

In the introduction of his 1983 co-edited collection *Confirmation: Anthology of African American Women Writers*, Baraka reflects that the objective of *Black Fire* was “to attack the house-negro appropriation of bourgeois aesthetics.”<sup>75</sup> Notably, Baraka does not say that the anthology sought to rescue or reform these literary turncoats. In the case of Smith he concludes his poem with the urging, “turn white you jive motherfucker and ram a the bomb up your ass.”<sup>76</sup> It would seem that if these perverse jive motherfuckers *just would* turn white the racial nature of emasculation would be solved, that is assuming that solving this problem was the objective of the Black Arts masculinist.<sup>77</sup> Appropriately, completed racial transformation would induce an act of self-sodomy via technologies of non-corporeal violence that Baraka had theorized as paramount to white male depravity.<sup>78</sup> However, it is the capacity of non-phenotypical elements of white faggotry to move across interracial lines that makes the black faggot artists doubly failed in his gendered incapacity. No longer a black man, not a *white* faggot but rather a *whitened* “black” faggot artist. The black faggot artist is sequestered to a terminally liminal state; no longer *fully* black masculine, never *fully* white emasculated. He is always turning, but never turned. Similar to the false promise of racial transformation that Clay sought via interracial sex, the adoption of white literary style exiles black writer from blackness yet offers no new racial home.

### **Generative Doubt: Re-Gendering Black Authorial Action**

It is unsurprising that like the reoccurring figure of the idealized Black Arts author his inversion, the archetypal ersatz black writer, is gendered male. This gendering is of course the essential first move to initiate the intraracial emasculation that serves as the counter-weight to black male authenticity. However, *Black Fire*'s insistent usage of male pronouns to discuss the role and duties of the black writer (notably this, seemingly reflexive, usage of a male pronouns is not at all distinct to the Black Arts Movement) takes on added significance, as not all its contributors were men. Sonia Sanchez, Leslie Alexander Lacy, Lindsay Barrett, Barbra Simmons aka Odaro, Carol Freeman, and Julia Fields contributed works, primarily poetry, to *Black Fire*.<sup>79</sup> One may ask, if *the* black artist is in Baraka's words “the holy black man,”<sup>80</sup> and as I have argued racial authenticity was predicated on particular assignments linked to presumptions of corporeal manhood, then is the Black Arts woman writer not black? Or, conversely is she not a woman? Scholars including E. Francis White, Cheryl Clarke, Cherise Pollard, Margo Crawford,

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<sup>75</sup> Amiri Baraka, introduction to *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women Writers* (New York: Morrow, 1983), 15.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, “Special Section,” 288.

<sup>77</sup> Though, as Phillip Harper has made quite clear, this problem was never meant to be solved as its continuous ensured a counter-point to anxiety-ridden masculinism.

<sup>78</sup> See Baraka's essay, “American Sexual Reference: Black Male.” Also, Chapter 2 of this dissertation provides a review of the featured argument of Baraka's essay.

<sup>79</sup> Notably only Barrett and Lucy contributed to the essay section. Otherwise, these contributions were that of poetry, fiction, and drama

<sup>80</sup> Baraka, “Foreword” to *Black Fire*, xvii.

and Carmen Phelps have each in different ways granted this topic deserved nuanced attention.<sup>81</sup> However, for my purposes the peculiar racial and gendered status of Black Arts women is a decisive position that may be leveraged to negotiate the masculinist impasse of authorship and authenticity. Put another way, without the same *degree* of masculine constraint dictating the terms of racial self-expressions the female Black Arts writer could imbricate self within the complicated relationship between authorship and action in a more explicit way than male authors.

As noted, *Black Fire* is nearly a fraternal collection. Perhaps if the collection were only comprised of male contributors it would be less noteworthy that Nikki Giovanni is not included. However, Giovanni, the most influential women poet of BAM alongside Sonia Sanchez, is conspicuously absent from *Black Fire*. Indeed, the collections speckling of women contributors makes Giovanni's absence all the more striking. Nonetheless, it is Giovanni's position as both a poet writing from outside of the margins of the anthology as well as one gendered outside the masculinized black revolutionary that makes her a doubly suitable interventionist to the prevailing logic of black authorial duty/conundrum explored in this chapter.

Maybe Giovanni was not have been included in *Black Fire* because she was otherwise occupied. In the spring of 1968, roughly half a year after the publication of *Black Fire*, Giovanni self-published perhaps her most revered collection of Black Power era poetry, *Black Judgment*. Interestingly, particularly in respect to Smethurst's discussion of Cultural Nationalism and the role of black publishing houses, the initial success of the *Black Judgment* lead Randall Dudley's celebrated Broadside Press to re-publish and distribute the collection in 1968. Two years later William Morrow and Company, the same publisher of *Black Fire*, published *Black Judgment* along with Giovanni's other successful collection *Black Feeling Black Talk* as a single collection. Of particular note is the inclusion of a poem titled, "For Saundra." The following lines from the poem can be read to direct attention to an instance in which a Black Arts poet explicitly acknowledges the enduring concern regarding the limits of literature in relation to the action of black revolution and the duty of the black revolutionary:

so i thought again  
and it occurred to me  
maybe i shouldn't write  
at all  
but clean my gun  
and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic  
times

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<sup>81</sup> Although, this certainly does not represent a comprehensive list, see: *But Some of Us Were Brave: All Women are White, All the Blacks are Men*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, et. al. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1982); Francis White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Pollard, "Sexual Subversions"; Carmen Phelps, *Visionary Women Writers of Chicago's Blacks Arts Movement* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012).

at all<sup>82</sup>

Evie Shockley has cited “For Sandra” to aid in a fine consideration of the natural world, human nature and urban landscape as a fundamental trope of American poetry.<sup>83</sup> Giovanni biographer Virginia C. Folwer considers the poem in the context of Giovanni’s personal evolution of gendered autonomy through the complex sexual dynamics of the Black Power era.<sup>84</sup> I mention these two outstanding examples to emphasize that the poem is one that deserves, and has received, multi-dimensioned attention. For my purposes, the poem is telling in that it addresses the enigmatic conundrum surrounding black authorship explored in this chapter with the most blunt and, according to the line of logic at stake here, most masculine proposition: stop writing and take action. Or, as Giovanni clearly decided to do, write—but write with explicit recognition of its quantifiable limits. It is these two possibilities and her decision to continue writing that suggests Giovanni is able to name and traverse masculine restrictions of black authorial authentication. Giovanni’s acknowledgment of Black Arts notions of writings limitedness and her decision to write anyway are purposeful, generative failures of sorts. Her recognition of the supposed limits of writing and her willingness to openly question, play with, and rebuke these limits doubles as evidence of liberation from, or at least non-circumscription to, masculine gender norms of Black Arts authorship. Her rejection of these demarcated limits allow her a relative freedom as *both* writer and revolutionary.

Although “maybe she shouldn’t write,” she does. And although *maybe* she should “clean her (my) gun,” we cannot know if she does or does not. Indeed, it is the end of poem, literally the blank page following its final words, which suggest authorial vacancy and promotes the possibility of Giovanni living her proposed action. She stages the prospect of “cleaning her gun” and “checking her kerosene” as that which should and possibly must replace writing, or at least exist as material acts outside of writing. Her self-identification within a dubious positioning as poet *and* potential revolutionary rather than with the poetic *as* revolution allows her liberation from restrictions of Black Arts ethos. At core, Giovanni thematizes what is disavowed in the work of the male *Black Fire* contributors—*doubt*. Indeed, she does not find doubt to be impediment to revolutionary action but rather to open up its possibility. Her capacity to acknowledge, embrace, and leverage doubt is because she, as a woman, is not bound by the same constraints of performing masculinity. It is Giovanni’s gender that, perhaps paradoxically as it may have otherwise greatly restricted her agency, excuses her from perspective gender norms and their implications for her as an author.

I end with this example to gesture to the possibility of a type of literary freedom particular to black woman’s writing despite and ironically as result of a Black Arts context that otherwise greatly restricted the prospects of black woman writing. However, more pointedly, I end here to tag Giovanni’s poem as signaling the difficulty for the male Black Art writer to expressly confront the self-doubt associated authorial practice (that is, without compromising their claim to the masculine and racial authenticity upon which this authorship stood and thus compromising their status as Black Arts writer). What is illuminative about “For Sandra” is that

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<sup>82</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “For Sandra,” *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni: 1968-1998*, ed. Nikki Giovanni (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 80.

<sup>83</sup> Evie Shockley, “Black Nature/Human Nature,” *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* 34.3 (Summer 2011): 763-766.

<sup>84</sup> Virginia C. Fowler, *Nikki Giovanni: A Literary Biography* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 40-41.

it was not, and I believe could not, at least not without considerable complication regarding the authority of the author, have been written by a male Black Arts Movement poet.

The doubt Giovanni taps into is the antithesis of the “natural” and /or “revolutionary” black-maleness; for the black male author, doubt signals a questioning of gender normality/masculine naturality that would throw revolutionary possibility into impossibility. For male writers, racial authenticity and revolutionary action are one and the same—and of course racial authenticity depends on adherence to a racialized gender norm of masculinity. To doubt would be to pervert one’s natural racialized gender state. Within the “in/out” binary of Black Arts fraternalism, doubt, like any hesitation, is not a tenable emotion and would result in the subject slipping into an outed zone of racial failure. In this respect, the binary is also cyclical as it upholds a perpetually circumscribed circuit of authentication; one is always doubling down on the demarcated terms of validation and the circle only gets smaller in each insistent proclamation. Indeed, from such an enclosed space masculine doubt was a protective accusation that safeguarded an increasingly cornered accuser. Any self-doubt transfigured into suspicion projected on other black male authors, real or invented, or authorship in general figured as an abstracted “I” that slipped the incriminating particularity of embodied self.

## Chapter 4

### Never Die Alone: Misguided Masculinity and the Marginalization of Donald Goines

#### Dressed to Impress: Assuming Masculine Radicalism

In John Oliver Killens' underappreciated novel *The Cotillion or One Good Bull is Half the Herd* the sturdy yet impressionable Yoruba Evelyn Lovejoy sits entranced by the poetry reading of the cooler than cool Ben Ali Lumumba. Donning all the perfunctory accessories of en vogue radicalism, including dark sunglasses that make the dim café nearly impossible to navigate, Lumumba delivers verse that evokes "Roi-Jones-Dante-Graham-Arche-Shepp-Askia-Muhamad-Toure."<sup>1</sup> Lumumba projects his "hip," "defiant," "fierce," "masculine" bravado on a smitten Yoruba.<sup>2</sup> At the conclusion of his reading Lumumba, having perceived the effect of his performance, approaches the beautiful and receptive Yoruba. As he initiates flirtatious conversation, Yoruba notes that his voice suddenly became "thin," like that of a "Georgia peckerwood who had graduated from Harvard," losing the commanding masculinity of his poetic voice: "all his blackness seems to vanish in the darkness of the Dark."<sup>3</sup> Here Yoruba conveys Lumumba's explicit transition from street-smart hip Harlem Black man to formally educated, square, whitened southern male. Indeed, Lumumba's convincing performance of revolutionary black masculinity is made all the more palpable by the nature of his post-performance transition. Lumumba informs the now befuddled but not wholly dismissive Yoruba that he plans to be a *real* writer, to produce *real* literature. The gut wrenching verse which just moments ago inspired and enticed Yoruba was simply "jive" only meant "for the birds, the Black ones I mean. All you got to do for this crowd here is call whitey a bunch of mother-humpers and say Black is beautiful, and like you got it made."<sup>4</sup> It was an act and he played his part well. Yoruba, one of the "Black birds," had responded just as he imagined she would, mesmerized by his masculine routine.

Roland Murray deftly reads *The Cotillion* as a Black Arts novel that, despite aggrandizing Black Power ethos and drawing on idioms of the "Black Aesthetic," challenges, often through satire, dominant notions of Black Arts era masculinity. Murray cites Lumumba as one whose capacity to convincingly *perform* authentic black masculinity signals Killens' recognition and restrained critique of the adaptable nature of identity politics, particularly gendered posturing. Indeed, we see that appropriation of political radicalism can be wielded for interests that fall outside of the purview of Black Arts political aims.<sup>5</sup> In this instance, Lumumba, whose long and complicated commitment to black revolution is chronicled across the arc of the novel, highlights the potential for the faux Black Arts participant to act as a sort of clandestine hustler who knowingly adapts aesthetic and affective Black Arts tropes self-servingly.

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<sup>1</sup> John Oliver Killens, *The Cotillion: or, One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Murray, *Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power and Masculine Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 96-114. Murray's chapter includes an exceptional reading of the poetry reading sketched in the first paragraph of this chapter.

Yoruba, who it should be mentioned ultimately falls in love and engages in political acts with Lumumba (acts that Murray also read as being, above all else, performative), cautions herself to be wary of Lumumba's capacity for seductive appeal. In a key passage Yoruba places Lumumba in the context of similar experiences with clandestine hustlers who erroneously yet *convincingly* embodied and spouted rhetoric of Black Power masculinity:

There were other hustlers around the Black Movement, thugs and hoodlums who had skimmed through a few books and memorized a few catch phrases, bought a few dashikis, put their do-rags in hiding for a season, washed the process out of their hair, changed their names, got themselves a niche or corner and gone into the business of Black Nationalism. They saw the movement as a hustle, and a mighty fine one. But they were not the movement. Not even were they of the Movement. They had been pimps before and were still pimps. And they were not the Movement. She must make herself remember that they were not the Movement.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Yoruba's monologue suggests a distinct type of infiltrator, one predicated on black self-fashioning for self-gain, not federally orchestrated quelling of social protest. The now well-documented extra-illegal tragedies and travesties of J. Edgar Hoover's brainchild COINTLPRO reveal the susceptibility of Black Power organizations to nefarious infiltration. Scholarship by the likes of Ward Churchill and Kenneth O'Reilly chronicle federally sponsored spies within the rank and file of Black Power organizations ranging from the Black Panther Party to the Watts Writers Workshop.<sup>7</sup> Such historiographical scholarship, along with the numerous autobiographic testimonials of black liberation veterans, reveals adaptation of organizational behaviors by infiltrators as a central means of corroding an organization from the inside out. William Maxwell's *F.B. EYES: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghost Readers Framed African American Literature* compellingly chronicles the FBI's longstanding interest in black writers as agents of black radical thought. Maxwell shines light on the FBI's history of what he dubs "literary blackface" which entails generally white FBI agents writing *as* black figures or in what they deemed to be in the style of black prose as a means of sabotaging intra or inter organizational relationships.<sup>8</sup> Whether it was by pen or person, Black Power organizations were under siege by undermining infiltrators and saboteurs.

However, for Yoruba rather than infiltrative outsiders, the concern is disreputable insiders of the black community. Yoruba's fears regarding those who hustled "the movement" by nefariously commandeering its most altruistic features for personal gain are evidenced in Donald Goines' 1972 novel *Black Gangster*. The novel chronicles the ascension and ultimate demise of recently freed convict and ambitious criminal of many talents, Prince. Set in Detroit amidst the thick air of national urban rebellions, Prince masterminds a faux black revolutionary organization that encourages and criminally prompts outrage at police brutality in order to extort community member contributions to the organization. In Prince's words, "Today is the year of

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<sup>6</sup> Killens, *The Cotillion*, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The Cointelpro Papers: The Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States* (Boston; South End Press, 1990); Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> William Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2015), 4-6.



the black man's revolution. Whenever revolution jumps off, somebody gains, so why not us with this particular one."<sup>9</sup> Prince points specifically to the "riots in '67" as evidence of a swelling outrage amongst black people in Detroit. Indeed it is the legitimacy of racism and police brutality that assures Prince that his plan is tenable. Prince seamlessly translates his skills as charismatic criminal leader into that of revolutionary spokesman. Prince commands the respect of crowds of community members by applying his hustling skills toward this new end. Certainly, the monetary ends of Prince's ambitions come at the cost of collective well-being and exploitation of black suffering. Nonetheless, immorality or racial traitorousness never proves to be a personal hindrance to his scheme. Prince's ultimate demise at the hands of an ostensive ally turned rival criminal, like the fate of all Goines' heroes, is less a reprimand of the ethics of the protagonists' ambition but evidence of the impending fatalism of underclass black men at large. Prince and Goines reflect a twinned concern of Black Arts masculinity toward the black hustler and their black authorial benefactors.

In the 1973 *Black Scholar* essay "Wanted: Some Black Long Distance Runners," published roughly a year after the publication of *The Cotillion* and *Black Gangster*, Killens admonishes those who embrace the ersatz radical figure that his fictional creation Yoruba so maligns, Prince so exemplifies, and Goines so produces. Killens, in the context of a rather standard BAM-era castigation of the depleting state of white civilization, charges that some black people have, due to psychological delusion or monetary greed, chosen to go down with whiteness' "sinking ship." Included in Killens' charges of black turncoats are, predictably, "black men limping along in high-heeled shoes." However, Killens couples the pervasive rhetoric of homophobia with the "glorification of black artists of the pimp and pushers."<sup>10</sup> The combination of the effeminized black male, the pimp, and the black artist who glorifies the pimp brings to the fore a unique dimension to the conglomerate of suspect figures of Black Nationalist fraternalism.

The pimp or hustler whose physically and psychologically masculine prowess stands as the crux of his identity represents an intraracial homosocial rival who at first glance is plainly distinguishable from the high-heeled "swish" or buttoned-upped "tom" that Killens sets as his iniquitous contemporaries. Moreover, the black author like Goines who ostensibly glorifies this figure in his letters represents a distinguishable literary foe from the writer whose work is preoccupied with mimicking the respectabilities of western white aesthetics and political priorities. It is the pimp as well the author who grandly depicts the pimp that shifts the direction of Black Arts intraracial masculine critique and reveals a new dimension of Black Arts masculine anxiety and regulating of authenticity.

To this point I have focused upon a host of figures of black masculine lack associated in myriad ways with proximity to deficient white male sexuality. As is evident in the previous chapters, figures such the black faggot, Uncle Tom, and mimetic Negro author were independent signifiers connected by their respective function in articulating the terms of black masculine compromise serving as boundary that threatened and secured authentic black masculinity. Comparatively, the pimp or street hustler, despite standing with his feet firmly planted in many prevailing terms of phallogentric masculinity, provided another and dissimilar figure for Black Arts critique of failed black manhood. Here the challenge to idealized manhood comes not from

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Goines, *Black Gangster* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1972), 67.

<sup>10</sup> John Oliver Killens, "Wanted: Some Black Long Distance Runners," *Black Scholar*, 5.3 (November 1973): 2-7.

dilution of black manhood in the purview of adaptation of corrupted white maleness but from the consequences of misapplied black masculinity that depletes the political possibility of nationalist collectivity and its reliance on masculine figureheads.

The pimp, conceived of as a figure whose composite is categorically recognized as individualist, brash, compelling, sexually alluring, and emotionally controlled yet prone to violence will be shown to signal a threat to the Black Arts masculinity's claim to the terms of black male authenticity rooted in urban male folk political potential. This figure's relationship to authentic black manhood is not one of vacated masculinity but of a masculinity that spurns collectivism and renounces the terms of normative patriarchy. Representationally, the black pimp functioned to bolster pejorative associations of black masculine sexual allurements and confirm incongruence with expectations of male familial and community responsibility. Importantly, as Killens' critique suggests, there is a dual threat at play with this particular menace to Nationalist collectivism. The pimp as figure *and* the author who glorifies the pimp representationally denote a partnership that promotes a problematic black masculine both in the streets and on the page. Indeed, there were *two* participants in this variant of intraracial masculine failure: the pimp who profited by exploiting sexuality within black communities and black male authors' fictional representations of pimps that lionize counter-revolutionary male identity in their literature. This chapter considers these two interrelated streams of Black Arts intraracial masculine critique.

Firstly, my chapter engages in the Black Arts critique of the pimp as compliant with the omnipotent white male power structure's expectations of black male behavior. Part One will follow the working approach of the previous chapters and focus on close readings of Black Arts literature to examine the character of explicit condemnation of the figure of the pimp. The pimp and hustler figure is cast as exploitative of the black community at large and the black women in particular through a misguided channeling of masculine capability. I will illustrate how Black Arts thinkers condemned the pimp as embodying and glorifying black male capital-driven narcissism and political nihilism that was injurious to black communal well-being, undermining the sanctity of black womanhood, and exemplifying male depravity. However, it will be shown that unlike the "eternal faggot," for instance, the improper course of the black pimp was correctable. Indeed the skillset of the pimp was subject to generative reformation and prospective accomplishment of revolutionary masculine identity.

In the second section of the chapter I pivot from the significance of Black Arts denouncement and proposed reclamation of the pimp by turning attention to the relationship between Black Arts and the popular literary genre of "Black Experience" novel. I will chronicle the emergence and makeup of the genre termed by formative scholars such as Justin Gifford and Kinohi Nishikawa as "Black Pulp Fiction."<sup>11</sup> In particular, I will focus on the work of the most prolific and evocative Black Experience novelist of the 1970s, the aforementioned Donald Goines. Black Pulp Fiction, and Goines as authorial benchmark, is characterized by a prose style of hardboiled realism and plot-driven narratives devoted almost exclusively to stories of the exploits of African American men embroiled in underworlds situated in northern urban ghettos. In the words of pulp fiction scholar Jerry Bryant, Goines' novels are set in a distinctly "black man's land" reigned over by shrewd men who know how to skillfully maneuver city landscapes

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<sup>11</sup> Justin Gifford, *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Publishing, 2013). Kinohi Nishikawa, "Reading the Street: Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines and the Rise of Black Pulp Fiction," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010).

by mastering, what Elijah Anderson dubs, the “code of the street.”<sup>12</sup> Such mastery entails that male figures have a penchant for violence and sexual unconventionality in an environment where state officials are as apathetic and dangerous as some fellow residents. These novels vacillate, depending greatly on interpretation, between venues for a racially specific escapist sensationalism, masochistic pleasures of dwelling in sites of intense abjection, and cautionary sagas that narrate the brutal undertow of systemic racism.

At core, Goines’ novels do not operate in the African American literary protest tradition of narratively traveling through racialized grief toward political grievance. Instead, as will be expanded upon in the pages to come, in the vein of Anne Cheng’s formative distinction between grievance and grief, Goines’ novels linger in affective expressions of black male grief. Rather than offering civic affirmation legible to the pervading political schema, these novels offer an aesthetic means of affective pleasure via representations of ephemeral masculine enterprise within the broader context of racially specific social abuse. To be sure, *this* can be read as a means of political critique and indeed a wholesale condemnation of the body politic, yet the novels offer no political solution and instead linger in the irremediable nature of racial abuse. Specifically, in the shaping hands of Goines, it is this variant of salacious black urban masculinity that is featured and upon which the interminable grief of blackness is ultimately visited and narrated.

I will consider the Black Experience novels in the scope of Black Arts. I shift my analytical approach from the outspoken admonishment of fags, Uncle Tom’s, whitened Negro authors, and in the first section pimps, to consider the significance of *virtual silence* as directed toward Goines in particular and the literary genre he dominated. Despite being the most prolific black novelist of the Black Arts era and perhaps *ever*, authoring a remarkable 16 works in less than five years, and despite his works being intended for and consumed by an urban black folk audience, Donald Goines is present only in conspicuous exclusion from the Black Arts Movement. I consider the terms of Black Arts response or lack thereof to Goines in the purview of the Movement’s expectations of black masculine identity. Specifically, I focus on the unrelenting grief of black life (a grief that even shapes pleasure and agency) featured in Goines’ novels as incongruent with the political project of black subjective affirmation and proposition of radical insurgence catalyzed by and reflected in Black Arts texts. Taking BAM’s *non-address as a distinct form of address*—as Sontag puts it, a distinct “element of dialogue”<sup>13</sup>—I speculatively theorize how Goines and the genre he is evocative of employed black masculinity in a manner that challenged Black Arts cultural politics of folk masculinity.

Of course not all silences are the same; in Sarah Duancy’s words, silence is “a mobile construct whose import shifts depending upon the discourse utilizing it and the context of its utilization.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, *this silence* in the shadow of the bombast directed toward the figures considered in previous chapters is a significant anomaly. The exclusion of Goines, an author who wrote about and to urban black folk, presents a conspicuous paradox in my broader consideration

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<sup>12</sup> Jerry Bryant, “*Born in a Mighty Land*”: *The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Elijah Anderson, *Code of Streets: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: Norton, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetic of Silence,” in *Styles of Radical Will: Susan Sontag*, (New York: Picador, 2002,) 11.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Duancy, “The Uses of Silence: A Twentieth-Century Preoccupation in the Light of Fictional Examples, 1900-1950,” (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2003), 91.

of Black Arts intraracial homosociality. While an absolute impact of the Black Arts Movement was the crafting of a black folk vernacular-driven aesthetic, the silence toward Goines suggest a telling constraint to the terms by which Black Arts contemporaries determined Black Aesthetic literary authentication. The potential reasons for Goines' exclusion are numerous, yet it is political disagreement regarding the reach of Black Power and the perfunctory role of the black writer in political propagation that is the foundational divide between BAM and Goines. More specifically, when considering gender as primary measurement for racial authenticity and thus political competence, masculinity appears as *the* emergent node evidencing the cause for Goines' position outside and perhaps purposefully marginalized from BAM. In short, I ask: how might Goines' work disturb BAM's expectations of revolutionary black manhood? And what can be learned about the restrictions of authenticated Black Arts masculinity by virtue of such disturbance? Finally, what can be gleaned from the silence toward his work? To be clear, my objective is not to bring Goines into the BAM fold or to cast judgment on the literary or political merit of the genre of Black Pulp Fiction. I seek to speculatively interrogate how the exclusion from the BAM canon of Goines and the types of male figures prominent in his novels illuminates the contours of Black Arts masculine ideals.

### **Pimp for the Revolution: “Brother Pimp,” False Consciousness, and Possible Redemption**

The Black Arts' and indeed Black Power's denouncement of the pimp is imbricated in pliable aesthetics of black manhood that revolutionary and pimp shared as affective resource. In his survey of black cultural iconography, *Black Camelot: African American Cultural Heroes in Their Times 1960-1980*, William Van Deburg introduces a sect of black male cultural heroes who “prowled” numerous popular mediums of fictional representation:

Bad good guys of color prowled the shadowy recess of the cultural landscape between 1960-1980. Chief among them were trickster like urban bad-men, hustlers, dealers, pimps, hit men, gangsters, assorted revolutionaries - and several squad rooms full of roguish but ever diligent detective types.<sup>15</sup>

This overview of “bad good guys” who graced screens in so-called Blaxploitation films, pages of dime store paperbacks, and nightly television programs in the 1970s curiously amalgamates an array of criminal figures seamlessly with a sort of Black Power catch-all category, “assorted revolutionaries.” Van Deburg's cataloging gestures to a telling overlap in qualities of lionized radical political figures of the 1960s and the wave of larger than life fictional black outlaw figures of 1970s popular culture. In unifying the likes of sex worker turned radical Sweetback and profit-seeking pimp Super Fly or gritty detective Gravedigger Jones and street savvy hustler Eldorado Red, Van Deburg shows that these figures of disparate character and diverging objective exist under a common rubric of black masculine heroic quality. In this respect, the 1970s bad black man “managed to join seemingly incompatible aspects of heroism and villainy.”<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the heroism of steadfast commitment to justice in the face of unjust obstacle and the villainy of precarious conviction and unsavory means of achieving personal desire exist across a shared spectrum of masculine capacity. For my purposes, Van Deburg's classification, which both unifies and distinguishes “bad good guys,” discloses the nature of

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<sup>15</sup> William Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African American Cultural Heroes in Their Times 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 194.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

shared traits between seemingly distinct black masculine figures, ranging from revolutionaries to pimps.

As scholar of black folk heroism John W. Roberts states, echoing sentiments of Penn Warren, Ellison, and a host of giants of literary Americana, those “dubbed heroic in one context or by one group of people may be viewed as ordinary or even criminal in another context or by other groups, or even by the same ones at different times.”<sup>17</sup> Looking at the latter half of Roberts’s statement, “black male heroes” unsurprisingly received as simultaneously heroic and villainous within black communities; one person’s hero may indeed be another’s villain. At core, the “bad man” rejected domineering white notions of who a black man was *supposed* to be. However, the matter of whom this individual chose to be varied. Jerry H. Bryant, through the foundational scholarship of Lawrence Levine and folklorist Roger D. Abrahams, names two distinct types of black masculine bad men: “moral hard men” and, simply, “hard men.” In short, the “moral hard-man” holds his standards of righteousness and communal justice at the core of his rebellious identity. Staunchly masculine, the moral hard-man’s embodied swagger faces and sometimes defeats white power structures with the goal of collective black reprieve in spite of personal vulnerability. Conversely, “hard men” in Bryant’s words “scoured social action.”<sup>18</sup> As pure narcissists their rebellion *may* be directed toward broader structures of white power but only if it serves self-interests. Power structures, be they macro or micro, white or black, are uniformly obstacles of personal gain. Certainly this iteration of the “bad man” was likely to commit acts of violence or trickery against black community members as white authority figures. Although approaches to intraracial acts of badness may differ from interracial badness, be it against badge or berets, the imperative was self-gain, usually monetary. The 1970s were an instance of both discursive overlap and impasse in respect to the aesthetic and political imperatives of “moral bad-men” and “bad-men” black masculine heroes. While such characters played different moral roles, they often shared costume, stage, and vernacular.

The identifiable 1970s bad man aesthetic was shaped by the cultural impact of 1960s black radical cultural discourse. Van Deburg’s chapter, “Championing the 1960’s Cultural Revolution” chronicles the celebrity status of Black Power figures like Huey Newton and H. Rap Brown and the popularization and marketing of styles associated with Black Power politics. Valiant, stylish, and capable of action, the Black Power *figure* was a composite of traditional American notions of masculine heroism, including that of the moral draw of the gallant outlaw.<sup>19</sup> However, this figure’s “outlaw” status was impelled by a racially radicalist agenda that challenged the foundational constrictions meant to ascribe who a black men was supposed to be. What Van Deburg’s consideration of the discursive resonances of Black Power manhood implies is that by the 1970s black radical stylization outlasted, or perhaps *out paced*, its original corresponding politics in the hands of savvy market forces and waning authority of black radical politics. In the realms of fictional representation, namely film and literature, adherence to a particular set of politics or organizational affiliation was not a prerequisite for Black Power *stylization*. Nor were politics necessarily a strict or chief representational aim of the market forces that manicured such stylization. Rather, such aesthetics’ adaptation hinged upon an affective association of politically marked images of self-determined black manhood.

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<sup>17</sup> John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badmen: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Bryant, *Born in a Mighty Land*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Van Deburg, *Black Camelot*, 62-84.

Undoubtedly, the terms of stylized black masculine assertiveness always carried a degree of radical political insubordination, as they were referential to radical politics of the 1960s in which such style gained currency. Yet, it was the associated radicalism that aided in fashioning heroism, not necessarily the explicit presumption that a heroic figure carried the political impetus of concerted revolution. Specifically, the culturally discursive elements of Black Power male radicalisms were taken up as a means of signifying masculine resistive bravado. In effect, masculinity as a pliable set of affective and embodied signifiers under a common rubric of resolute heroism adapted to the disparate agendas of 1970s black male cultural figures. What was shared across the many black male heroic figures was a type of brash black masculinity that defied societal stratification. That is to say, despite one's subjective conclusion regarding if a specific figure fought on the side of good or bad, they were *all* legibly "bad" in the vernacular sense.

However, as scholar of Black Nationalism Algernon Austin puts it, "what was meant by cultural nationalism was not *Shaft*" (emphasis in original).<sup>20</sup> Nor, it would seem, was it the literary works of Donald Goines or Iceberg Slim. Black pulp fiction has been deemed by the likes of Nathaniel Norment to be the literary equivalent of "Blaxploitation."<sup>21</sup> To name Black pulp fiction to be, in the words of Bernard W. Bell, "Blaxploitation novels"<sup>22</sup> can be dismissive of literary particularities and a range of author-specific motifs. While such comparisons are to an extent apt they reflect analysis of convenience in light of a lack of concerted attention to the literature. Nonetheless, Black Pulp Fiction was the literary articulation of thematic cross-sections of Black Power/Arts and Blaxploitation cinema. The thematic nature of Blaxploitation film and pulp fiction texts formed a nexus at the figure of pimp as a featured character. Similar to Van DeBurg, Stephanie Dunn's analysis of Blaxploitation films links Black Power era and pimp/hustler figures through shared masculine posturing. Dunn states that such films hinged upon a "black masculinity associated with the hustler/pimp and Black Power idea."<sup>23</sup> Again, while "hustler/pimp" and "Black Power idea" are each distinct they are twinned in their orbiting around the common signs of black urban manhood. For instance Austin's mention of John Shaft who, neither Black Power radical nor pimp, is a character whose legibility is drawn at the crossroads of nationalist radicalism and street hustler heroism; certainly, he is neither but is informed by both. It is the relationship between blackness, manhood, and folk urbanity as tropes of heroism that serve to spur Black Arts dissociation from the pimp figure. To put it simply, *he*, the pimp, could easily be confused with *them*, the revolutionaries. Moreover, *he*, as alluring male figure of the black folk community, could hold sway over the population that *they*, the conscious authors of masculine revolt, hoped to appeal to.

Larry Neal's 1968 poem "Brother Pimp" distills the contours of Black Arts' disavowal of the pimp as well as the recognition of his potential. Part chastisement, part ultimatum, and ultimately part appeal to his prospective redemption, the poem charts masculine anxieties and the

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<sup>20</sup> Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (New York City: NYU University Press, 80).

<sup>21</sup> Nathaniel Norment, Introduction to *The Addison Gayle Jr. Reader* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xlv.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard W. Bell, *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (Boston; University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 255.

<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Dunn, "*Baad Bitches*" and *Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films* (Urbana: University Illinois Press, 2008), 98.

unique capacities of the pimp to the Black Arts' aims.<sup>24</sup> Neal's poem is dedicated to "the memory of Iceberg Slim and others who have walked these streets."<sup>25</sup> Iceberg Slim, born Robert Lee Maupin and later known as Robert Beck, was the author of nine books most notably his impactful 1967 memoir, *Pimp: The Story of My Life*. Donald Goines' literary inspiration, Slim was Holloway House' original star author of "Black Experience" paperbacks. Dedicated to Iceberg Slim, as opposed to Beck, Neal's poem takes aim at the literal pimp, not the pimp as *author* or fictive depictions of the pimp. The opening line establishes the poem as written directly to the pimp, with Slim as its representative, in a manner that locks the author and audience in antagonistic intimacy. Neal writes "you ain't shit; and neither are we without you."<sup>26</sup> Following Philip Brian Harper's evaluation of BAM poetics, the direct address of the poem, written to Slim/pimps, situates all other readers in a position of *overhearing* Neal's directed reprimand of Slim.<sup>27</sup> As audience we, those who are not Slim or those he denotes, are privy to an ostensibly private lecture and are indirectly involved in the broader implications of Neal's address. Namely, not only is the pimp worthless in his current state but the collective black "we," a term that implies the inclusiveness of the reader outside the direct terms of the poem's address, are worthless without him. He is after all designated as "Brother" from the outset of the poem's title, albeit a temporarily lost brother.

The fundamental dynamics of the pimp's supposed failure, and potential, is his misapplication of masculinity. The primary quarrel with the pimp, the reason he "ain't shit," is his managerial role in the degradation of black women and subsequent corruption of the black familial/national unit. Here the pimp is the transmutation of the black patriarch from benevolent figurehead of nuclear family to deceptive administrator of economized flesh. Furthermore, Neal highlights the pimp's role in sex trade as serving the long-standing tradition of white male fetishization and criminal violation of black women as commoditized sexual beings. Neal writes, "A man does not allow his women to go down on sick white beasts."<sup>28</sup> Neal *is* concerned with the sanctity of black womanhood and the risks of defilement implicit in prostitution. A fact that should not go overlooked or underappreciated. However, concurrently, it is the implications of the pimp operating as conduit to the deviant sexual whims of white male desire for black women that is the core of *his* masculine failure. For Neal, a real man would not play the role of interracial sexual intermediary. Furthermore, the sexual domination of black pimps over black prostitutes is a veiled domination of white men over black men.

The supposed masculine power of the pimp is understood as a ruse meant to placate masculine potential within the scope of Black Nationalist production. Neal usurps the pimp's superficial power over black women, and the implicit power he holds over other men in his capacity to control *his* women, by contextualizing his occupation in a broader landscape of racialized capitalist exploitations: "You help the beast make whores out of back women, only you yourself are a whore."<sup>29</sup> In relation to the bestialized white pervert, a phrasing we have seen

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<sup>24</sup> Larry Neal, "Brother Pimp," in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), 216-217.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 217.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 217.

<sup>27</sup> Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

<sup>28</sup> Neal, "Brother Pimp," 216.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

in previous poems included in *Black Fire*,<sup>30</sup> Neal theorizes the embodied degradation of black women doubling as a psychological masculine degradation. It's not that black women's protection wasn't actually central but that protection, or its lack, reflected the quality of manhood. In step with the logic of Cleaver, black political and social emasculation is articulated through sexual terms that implicate the black male in embodied sexual crimes committed on black women. However, in this instance it is not a matter of black patriarchal incapacity but rather active black male cooperation, inversion of patriarchal duty, and indeed facilitation of exploitative white male power. Pimps were thus paradoxically "outlaws" who behaved as collaborators of white male's racist system of law and order; outside the white man's laws but inside his expectations of black male lawlessness. They, the supposed pimp, were in fact *being pimped* by a white (always implied male) power structure that manipulated faulty masculine agency that degraded self and all those who one came into contact with, namely black women. Neal declares the pimp's power as illusion and pleads, in a bellowing tone of all capitalization, that the pimp redirects his potential and:

JOIN THE STRUGGLE  
FOR REAL MANHOOD  
LINK YOUR NAURAL LIFE-SENSE  
TO THE REAL SOUL-THING<sup>31</sup>

The aim of "REAL MANHOOD" is situated as the primary concern of "THE STRUGGLE" for, presumably, black liberation. The implication for the pimp of this call to "JOIN" is that upholding the sanctity of black women is at core a byproduct of "real" manhood. Again, this is not to say that the protection of and care for black women was disingenuous in Black Arts. Nor, as history has made painfully clear, that black women were not indeed uniquely vulnerable to interracial sexual violence. Rather that racial castigation and appeal to prospective reclamation, as directed at the pimp, is foundationally a question of one's manhood. Neal stages "real manhood" as a *choice* for the pimp contingent on his decision to return to his "natural" self and thus away from his racial and gendered corruption, which he has currently chosen. Neal's denaturalization of the pimp's trademark manhood situates him as a willing accomplice in the degeneration of black male as protector of black female sanctity. However, it is the *choice* of failed manhood that is his greatest crime *and* greatest potential. Unlike the "eternal faggot" the misuse of masculinity by the pimp retains the prospect of redress.

Neal is careful that his critique does not fully bifurcate the cultural orientation of the street savvy "brother pimp" from himself as populist black revolutionary poet. Historian Russell Rickford, in his study of Black Power era schooling, notes a broader cultural truth that "young militants regarded the black city core as suppressed political territory and a key site for remaining community."<sup>32</sup> Thus, a touchy feature of this variant of intraracial reproach was to avoid ostracizing one's self from "the street" and render that self what pulp author and critic Gary Phillips would deem an unhip "square" in relation to the "cool" pimp. Recall, Neal dedicated the poem to Slim as evocative of all misguided men "who walked these streets."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See pages 64-66 of chapter 3 of this dissertation.

<sup>31</sup> Neal, "Brother Pimp," 217.

<sup>32</sup> Russell Rickford, *We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and Radical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>33</sup> Neal, "Brother Pimp," 216.



“*These streets*”(emphasis mine) as opposed to *those streets* or *the streets* suggests Neal and Slim share a spatial relationship that functions to locate Slim, and pimps at large, within the same terrain as Neal as representative of Black Arts. Neal goes on to admit, “I used to dig your hip way,” noting the pimp as well-dressed, stylish, and capable of “running game.”<sup>34</sup> Neal’s specific admission that he was *formerly* susceptible to this allure reveals his familiarity with his way of life as well as his evolution. Neal’s fluency with Slim’s “hip ways” also suggests the need for him to remain in touch with those who are likely to *still* find Slim to be hip. Slim scholar Kinohi Nishikawa notes, “Slim’s influence as a popular author resided in the demographic core of Black Power’s political base.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the Black Arts/Black Power advocate faced a competitor in the likes of Slim; one who resonated with the population, the urban folk at large and lumpen-proletariat in particular, that Black Arts often claimed to speak from and generally hoped to appeal to. Slim posed a hazard not only as personally unreformed but also as influential within the wing of community that BAM focused its attention upon. Appealing to Slim to reform and embrace the revolutionary potential of his natural masculine self also doubled as the recruitment of an influential figure amongst urban male folk.

The posthumous memorialization of the poem dedication, “to *the memory* of Iceberg Slim” (emphasis mine) is curious, as he was alive at the time of the poem. In fact, Slim/Beck was doing quite well and beginning to emerge as an author in his own right. However, Neal’s memorial to Iceberg Slim sits neatly with the poem’s consistent appeal for his development and potential as, Neal writes, “would be hero, would be black man.” Neal’s chastisements are matched by a stern appeal to extraordinary potential. Neal encourages Slim to put his skills to work for the right purpose, to stop “pimping the revolution” and “pimp *for* the revolution”<sup>36</sup> (emphasis mine). In effect, Neal optimistically prophesies the death of the hustler Iceberg Slim and the birth of revolutionary Robert Beck. This belief in reclamation is specific to this iteration of BAM homosocial discourse; the belief that the pimp is especially equipped as revolutionary black man. His compromise is not rooted in inadequate masculinity but rather an inappropriate utilization of masculinity grounded in unenlightened psychology. Prolific BAM playwright Ed Bullins exemplifies a confirmation of Neal’s plea in his 1973 play *The Corner*. *The Corner* tells the story of Cliff, a pimp of admired reputation who renounces his lifestyle to “become a family man,” marrying one of his prostitutes and eyeing a future as a father.<sup>37</sup> Cliff’s transformation is coupled with him leaving behind the materials of his prestige, his car and remaining women, to his hustler peers.<sup>38</sup> While the viewer/reader never sees Cliff’s “square” life in fruition, as Genevieve Fabre points out, Cliff “shatters the image he once embodied” yet the experience of “being a successful pimp has prepared Cliff to assume the role of a *respectable* leader”<sup>39</sup> (emphasis mine).

The most striking distinction between the hustler/pimp as *failing* black man from the *failed* figures considered in previous chapters is the potential for revolutionary consciousness,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>35</sup> Nishikawa, “Reading the Street,” 168.

<sup>36</sup> Neal, “Brother Pimp,” 217.

<sup>37</sup> Ed Bullins, “The Corner,” *Black Drama Anthology*, eds. Woodie King and Ron Milner, (New York: New American Library, 1971, 87-88.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Genevieve Fabre, *Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 157.

even leadership, by virtue of masculine misstep. The capacity for redemption and appeal to reorientation of talents underwrites Neal's chastisement of Slim and orients Cliff's transformation. Goines biographer Eddie B. Allen writes in his candid style, "To the uninitiated, the pimp was often just a punk nigger who didn't want to get a real job or behave like a real man."<sup>40</sup> However, Bonnie Rhee Andryeyev articulates that there was, presumably for those who *were* initiated, a specific intellect and subversive potential unique to the pimp. Andryeyev writes that the pimp figure found in the novels of Slim and Goines assumed skills rooted in a racially and gender specific epistemology in which they crafted a "ghetto knowledge inaccessible to whites."<sup>41</sup> It stands to reason, within the binarized thinking, that this was specifically black and indeed masculine knowledge. The pimp as outlaw, unlike the fag or Uncle Tom who were by and large lost to the Nationalist fold, *always* seems to carry the prospect of racial reclamation. Where the Uncle Tom and fag *might* be able to come *back* to blackness, the pimp could *pass through* his indiscretion to respectable blackness. Having passed through the fire of racist imposition in a manner that urged the cultivation of masculine tools of resistance, albeit wrongheaded tools, it was a matter of psychological transformation and reapplication of masculine capacity.

This figure was truly, in the most explicit sense, *self*-determined, yet it was his notion of self that required revision. The pimp or street hustler was an ideal candidate for Black Art masculinity, wielding traits associated with *true* manhood, all that was necessary was political reorientation. This was most evident in the iconizing of BAM's most revered figure of black manhood, Malcolm X. Famously eulogized by actor and activist Ossie Davis as "our living black manhood," it is not a stretch to call him the patron saint of Black Power. Essential to the image of Malcolm as the realized ideal of black manhood was his capacity to, in the phrasing of Manning Marable, reinvent himself. No one stage of reinvention was more critical to his Black Power status than his development from slick hustler Detroit Red to austere intellectual NOI minister Malcolm X. He was the ultimate in evolutionary identity; Malcolm was masculine *possibility* fulfilled. Larry Neal's first-person retrospective poem "Malcolm X-An Autobiography" (published the same year as "Brother Pimp") situates Malcolm's stint of adolescent criminality as the expression of a budding energy that he would be celebrated for harnessing, "I hustler. I pimp. I unfulfilled black man/bursting with destiny."<sup>42</sup> Neal, via his assumption of first person narration, stages Detroit Red as a self-aware liminal identity, one whose fault and lack serves in the process of achievement and fulfillment.

While Malcolm was the sterling example of the redirection of a street-fashioned skillset he was far from alone. The supposed criminal who comes to recognize the nature of his misconducts as the coerced result of a systemic racist imposition is a revered Black Power era mainstay. A few of the most recognized examples are Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Ehthridge Knight, Marvin X, and Huey Newton, all of whom produced essays and literature while incarcerated. For a number of these authors, literal incarceration was deployed as metaphoric paradigm to articulate the state of black American repression amongst the ostensibly

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<sup>40</sup> Eddie Allen Jr., *Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin), 97.

<sup>41</sup> Bonnie Rhee Andryeyev, "Whose Mean Streets?: Donald Goines, Iceberg Slim, and the Black Noir Aesthetic," in *Street Lit: Representing The Urban Landscape*, ed. Kennan Norris (Lanham: The Scarecrows Press, Inc. 2012), 22.

<sup>42</sup> Larry Neal, "Malcolm X: An Autobiography," *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, eds. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 315.

“free.” Fatefully, physical imprisonment was staged as a condition that might free one’s mind to more truly recognize the fact that, in the words of Zayd Shakur, member of the incarcerated Panther 21, “All America is the prison.” Dan Berger and Lee Bernstein’s scholarship on prisons, politics, and art argues that in the 1970s imprisonment lent an authenticating authority to writers as front-line testimonials of victims of, and resisters to, racial subjugation at its most explicit. Moreover, writing from or after spending time behind bars served to defuse potential disconnectedness from a folk audience who may feel alienated from assumedly elitist literature.

In the vein of Neal’s call for Slim to “pimp for the revolution” and Killens’ disdain for those whose “hustle was the movement,” the relationship of pimp and *pimped* was a steady paradigm used to express the nefarious motivations of black authors or exploitive white institutions. In Clarence Major’s introduction to the indispensable Black Arts poetry collection, *The New Black Poetry*, he stages the compilation of poems as “death cries to the pimp *par excellence* of the recent capitalist stages of the world, testimonies against brutal psychological engravings of his base self-profit-oriented psychology, his sham stance.”<sup>43</sup> Amiri Baraka finds the term practical in the essay “Nationalism vs. Pimp Art” to describe exploitative black artists who intend to act in the interest of Black Nationalism. In the essay “Negro Theatre Pimps Get Big Off Nationalism,” originally published as the foreword to the play *Jello*, the term “pimp” is used to describe white oriented black people who support or make deficient art in the name of, but without devotion to, Black Nationalism. Also, Baraka brands groups that work with white radicals, particularly the Black Panthers, as “pimping” the notion of nationalism for their organizational benefit.<sup>44</sup> In the hands of Baraka “pimp,” as a useful verb, is used in various directions to describe systems of relations ranging from economic to political that he deems exploitative of black people. In a 1974 *Black World* article, “Toward Ideological Clarity,” Baraka, in a manner that displays his shift towards Marxism, focuses upon systems of the bourgeoisie that “pimp” the working class—the pimp becomes a rhetorical proxy for the upper class and its manipulation of working class interest.

Similar to debates over the status of *Black Fire* as a Nationalist text, due to its publication through William Morrow (see chapter 3), questions regarding white production and black text are central to the pimping paradigm as explanatory of exploitation of black writers as well as the questionable consciousness of a black author. As will be clear in the pages to come, the dynamic of white publishers and black authors was at the crux of questions regarding proper masculinity and racial authenticity within the emergence of the Black Pulp Fiction genre. The capacity for redemptive transformation is thrown into flux when the pimp/bad man never finds, or knowingly *chooses* to reject the prescribed terms of nationalist guided masculine reclamation. Indeed, the potential of the pimp, or his author, was unguaranteed.

### **Pulping Blackness: Holloway House and the Making of the Black Experience Genre**

Is Neal’s “Brother Pimp” addressed *solely* to Iceberg Slim *the pimp* or to Iceberg Slim as the retired pimp turned author of books *about* pimps? Clearly, the approach of my close reading above emphasizes Neal’s address and critique of the pimp as literal figure. However, in the genre of Black Experience literature that Slim helped birth, any hard distinction between pimp and

<sup>43</sup> Clarence Major, “Editors Introduction,” *New Black Poetry*, ed. Clarence Major (New York: International Publishers, 1969,) 11.

<sup>44</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Nationalism vs. Pimp Art,” *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965*, (New York: Random House, 1972,) 129.

author of pimp tales is quite intentionally uncertain. While I found nothing that suggests that Neal knew Iceberg Slim personally, his poem (1966) predates Slim's memoir (1967) by less than a year and it is fair to conclude that Neal knew *about* him before he emerged as a mainstream public figure. As mentioned, the relative insiderist notoriety of Slim as pimp, eclipsed soon thereafter by his celebrity author status, signposts a collapsing of *Beck* as author of texts about pimps with *Slim* as representative of pimps. In fact, the conflation of textual identity and author identity would be integral to Beck/Slim's persona and subsequently become the paradigmatic cornerstone of the literary genre he initiated.

In the case of Slim/Beck the overlap of self and narrative was encouraged by the autobiographical nature of his landmark first book, *Pimp: The Story of My Life*. Beck framed his memoir as a hard-learned cautionary tale intended to deter those who may be seduced by the material shimmers that obfuscate the despair of the pimp. Beck was explicit in disparaging his experience as a pimp in the interest of warning his readers. In the preface to *Pimp* he acknowledges the cruelties of experience and distaste their recounting will likely evoke, but he hopes, "one intelligent, valuable young man or woman can be saved from the destructive slime; then the displeasure I have given will have been outweighed by that individual's use of his potential in a socially constructive manner."<sup>45</sup> However, for many readers the text's adventurousness, rich prose, and pointed marketing as sensational expose overwhelmed any cautionary sentiment. D.H. Graham, who gave the text its first scholarly treatment in 1973, scolded the "glamourized negative stereotypes."<sup>46</sup> According to the disapproving reception by some in the Black Panthers, whom, following a visit to party headquarters, Slim describes as expressing a "polite disdain" and suspicion that he leveraged fantastical stereotyping in the interest of a "quick buck." (*This* reception devastated Beck who greatly admired the Panthers as "authentic champions and heroes of the black race."<sup>47</sup>) Indeed, his dynamic performance on talk show couches and lecture circuits suggests that for many Becks' cautioning was swallowed by the magnetism of his story and enthralling nature of his storytelling.

What is more, Holloway House Publishing, Beck's publisher, milked the autobiographic angle as proof of authenticity crucial to the memoir's appeal. Less cautionary and more fantastic in tone the book was marketed as a genuine peek into "...what lurks beneath the surface of every city."<sup>48</sup> The back cover ad copy emphasized that this was story that only a *real* pimp could tell, but never had, that is, until Iceberg Slim. Two years after its release and already in its fifth reprinting, the following Holloway House advertisement for *Pimp* summates their stress on alluring sensationalism of authorial authenticity: "No other author comes anywhere near Robert Beck's description of the raw, brutal reality of life in the black jungle. He grew up in Chicago's ghetto, became known as "Iceberg Slim" in the sex and drug underworld and used this pseudonym for his books."<sup>49</sup> The authenticity of the author rooted in experience with criminality, namely exploitation of women, became crucial to the marketing of the budding genre and Holloway House's hallmark offering.

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Beck, *Pimp: The Story of my Life* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1969), xiii.

<sup>46</sup> D.H. Graham, "Negative Glamour: The Pimp Hero in the Fiction of Iceberg Slim," *Obsidian* 1.2 (1975): 8.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Beck, *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1971), 13.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Beck, "Back Cover," *Pimp: The Story of my Life*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1967.)

<sup>49</sup> Holloway House advertisement for *Pimp*, *New York Times*, Nov 16, 1969, BR74.

Pulp scholar Peter Gilstrap notes, “On the vast map of publishing, Holloway House is a small dot at best.”<sup>50</sup> Bentley Morris and Ralph Weinstock founded Holloway House Publishing in the early 1959. A one-stop shop Holloway’s editing, production, and marketing was all in-house, and these were humble quarters indeed. Exclusively dedicated to paperbacks Holloway projected their literary reading audience as adjunctive to their initial production of the men’s magazines *Adam* and *Sir Knight*. *Playboy*-inspired, *Adam* and *Sir Knight* featured soft-core nudity and lifestyle articles targeted at middle-class white male consumers. According to scholars like Elizabeth Fraterrigo, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Michael Kimmell, the boom in men’s culture outlets was the consequence of post-WWII male domestication that had supposedly forced men to confine their masculine predisposition to rags like *Adam* and *Sir Knight*. To buttress their magazine’s sales and the leanings of their male readership, Holloway House published an odd array of paperbacks including sensational Hollywood biography, literary biography, erotica, and pseudoscience sex studies. However, following the Watts rebellions of 1965, Holloway House fatefully shifted the direction of its paperback production toward what they recognized to be an untapped market of black writers and readers living in under-resourced inner-city communities. Morris and Weinstock began taking active interest in black authors after seeing the boom of young black writers associated with the Black Arts initiative Watts writers’ workshop and black student activism at UCLA.<sup>51</sup> After releasing *Some Like it Dark: The Intimate Biography of a Negro Call Girl* by Kipp Washington, as told to Leo Guild, Holloway House fell upon their hallmark in 1967 when they published *Pimp*.

*Pimp* sold millions of copies and garnered attention, both good and bad, beyond anything Holloway House had previously produced. Following the unforeseen success of *Pimp*, Morris and Weinstock transitioned into the business of almost uniformly publishing books by black authors with working class, urban black audiences in mind.<sup>52</sup> Circumventing the literary establishment and publishing works without the interest of white or middle-class black readership Holloway House carved a dedicated niche of black authors and black male urban working-class readership. Holloway’s was a unique approach, to say the least. Major publishing houses remained racial fortresses that only a few black authors scaled. Of course, there is a heritage of African American authors like Ann Petry, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and Claude Brown who found respective acclaim writing novels about black urban experiences. However, a white-owned publishing house dedicated to works about black urban experiences, written in prose that crisscross brusque realism and extravagant grimdark, was pioneering indeed.

Holloway House’s catalogue featured hundreds of works by or about black people with

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<sup>50</sup> Peter Gilstrap, “The House That Black Built: The Forty Year Saga of Holloway House, Iceberg Slim, and How a Small LA Publisher Survived as the Voice of the Black Street experience,” *The Misread City; New Literary Los Angeles*, eds. Scott Timberg and Dana Gioia (Los Angeles: Red I Len Press, 2003), 87-99.

<sup>51</sup> Justin Gifford, “Harvard in Hell: Holloway House Publishing Company “Players Magazine”, and the Invention of Black Mass-Market Erotica: Interviews with Wanda Coleman and Emory “Butch” Holmes II,” *MELUS* Vol. 35, No. 4, Winter 2010, 112. Allen, *Low Road*, 112.

<sup>52</sup> Notably in 1973 Morris and Weinstock returned to their men’s magazine roots with the publication of *Players* magazine. *Players* was envisioned to be, in the words of Gifford “a cross between *Playboy* and *Ebony*.” See Gifford “Harvard in Hell” and chapter five of *Pimping Fictions*.

“Black Experience Books” operating as the chief offering of the collection. Undoubtedly, the largest sub-section of Black Experience collection was designated as fictional novels. Hyperrealist prose is the genre’s definitive feature. The novels are fast paced and often brutal stories of urban underclass exploits. Moreover, Holloway House was dedicated to sensationalist marketing that keyed into the realist brutality featured in the texts. In the heyday of the 1970s, unconcerned with the market saturation that would eventually come, Black Experience titles were published rapidly and early editions were littered with shoddy editing. Capitalizing on the desire of the market through express production of new content prevailed over editorial concerns.

None of this is to say Holloway made much of a wave in the mainstream publishing community; initially they struggled and generally failed to garner significant advertising or review outlets. What became clear, however, was that the publicity provided by the likes of *New York Times* or *Ebony* was wholly unnecessary.<sup>53</sup> Frankly, their base readers were not finding out about the books through such outlets. The LA duo relied greatly on local outlets in black communities for promotion and sale. Eddie B. Allen notes Holloway made a point of “marketing its products in urban communities and unconventional places that might be better suited to unconventional stories.”<sup>54</sup> These books were sold at newsstands and liquor stores and, following the strategy of other paperback publishers, at military bases. Moreover, novels were as often recommended by word of mouth and shared communally as they were purchased.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the Black Nationalist imperatives of their black publisher contemporaries like Broadside Press or Third World Press, Gifford notes Morris and Weinstock were *far* from freedom fighters dedicated to backing liberation of restricted black literature. They were businessmen and black-authored books were their product. Thus, the small LA press saw branding and product placement as primary prerogatives and their branding was as sensational, perhaps more sensational, than the actual books.

The biographical dimension to authenticating the text shifted in implication when Beck’s expressly autobiographical memoir made way for the fictional novels that made up the bulk of Black Experience offerings. The emphasis on personal experience within the shift from biography, the most impactful offering of Beck’s canon, to novel, the sole medium penned by Goines, had the impact of confusing already blurry lines between fact and fiction around criterion of black masculine authenticity. As we shall see, the importance of the “truth” of the Black Experience text is less important than implications of the *insistence* of its truth as vital to the production and popularity of the genre.

### **Real Fiction: Donald Goines and Black Experience Novelistic “Fiction”**

If Robert Beck was the originator of Black Experience genre and *Pimp* its exalted landmark text, then Donald Goines was his upstart disciple turned “undisputed master of the

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<sup>53</sup> Initially the *New York Times* refused to run an advertisement for *Pimp* due its title. However, after Holloway House found success beyond mainstream advertisements Holloway House did, from time to time, have advertise in *New York Times*, as evidence in note 19. Similarly, Holloway did not advertise Slims work in *Ebony*, however, Donald Goines first novel *Dopefiend* received a single paragraph feature in the April 1972.

<sup>54</sup> Allen, *Low Road*, 106.

<sup>55</sup> See Gwendolyn Osborne, “The Legacy of Ghetto Pulp Fiction,” *Black Issues Book Review* 3.5 (2001) for accounts of people experience sharing Goines and Iceberg Slims novel. Also Nishikawa attends to this as key to the novels circulation and popularity.

Black Experience novel” whose prolific writing served as Holloway’s marquee collection. Goines, a native of Detroit, was familiar with variants of street level illegal enterprise. He lived the majority of his adult life addicted to heroin and immersed in low-level crime, ranging from bootlegging corn liquor to robbing local bingo nights.<sup>56</sup> For the final five years of his short 39-year life, writing served as a comparative reprieve from the stresses of a life of small-scale criminality. Yet his addiction and the financial demands of his family never allowed Goines to fully exorcise himself of the dangerous world he wrote about. In 1974, Goines and his common-law wife Shirley were tragic victims of an unsolved home invasion murder. In the wake of his murder, Holloway House author Eddie Stone wrote in the rushed and sloppy biography, *Donald Writes No More*, that Goines had “risen from the gutter to the penthouse.”<sup>57</sup> In the interest of provocative myth-making Stone *greatly* exaggerates. Despite Goines’ growing success as a writer, between his heroin dependence and the dubious salary practices of his publisher he never lived luxuriously, nor was he born into poverty.

Born in 1937, Goines was raised in a stable lower middle-class Detroit home of “relative privilege.”<sup>58</sup> The shy son of business-owning parents, his formative years were a far cry from the dilapidated world of his future fictional characters. However, living in the pronounced racial segregation of Detroit meant “relative privilege” still promised proximity to the assorted crimes and associated lifestyles that Goines would come to embrace and write about. Moreover, as biographer Eddie B. Allen chronicles, Goines sought out the more seedy dimensions of Detroit in an effort to assert himself in the face of peers’ taunts of his middle-class status and light complexion.<sup>59</sup> After a short and, considering Goines’ lifelong propensity to shun authority, curious stretch in the Air Force, Goines returned from Korea addicted to heroin. Taking residence back in Detroit, Goines quickly became absorbed in numerous criminal acts including bootlegging and armed robbery that resulted in him being in and out of prison. He began his career as a writer during a 1969 prison-stint for larceny. Goines was inspired to write after he, like so many of inmates, read *Pimp*. While incarcerated Goines wrote the manuscript for his first novel, and that would ultimately be his second Holloway House release, *Whoreson*. A first-person narrative, the novel tells the tale of the tumultuous life of Whoreson Jones, a child born to a black prostitute mother and absent white john father. The story chronicles Whoreson who ascends and descends in the brutal world of street hustling.<sup>60</sup>

*Whoreson*, like the majority of Goines’ work, lacks the sly wit and underlying prospect of

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<sup>56</sup> The story goes, according to Eddie Allen, that Goines attempted to hold up a local bingo night that his mother regularly attending. Donald’s mother, recognizing her son, castigated and slapped Donald. Donald subsequently left, without any the games money. Allen, *Low Road*, 70.

<sup>57</sup> Eddie Stone, *Donald Writes No More: A Biography of Donald Goines* (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing), 9

<sup>58</sup> Allen, *Low Road*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> See Nishikawa for stellar reading of *Whoreson* and themes around Moynihan’s theories of matriarchy and pathologized black emasculation.

redemption found in his hero Slim.<sup>61</sup> In the parlance of Robert Frost's distinction, Goines' stories wade in interminable space of *grief* rather than the restorative anticipations of *grievance*. Anne Cheng suggests that racial grief is to be understood as an inveterate state of being, a state induced by foundational utilities of racial identity to subject formation and social stratification. Grief's psychological emergence and social register is grounded in designations of blackness's relative subjective lack, a distinctiveness in ontology outside of the scope of social or legal reprisal. For Cheng, the nature of racial grief, while informing the impetus for Politically tangible grievance, exists below and beyond Political outlets that grievance necessarily find foothold. Goines work is not about "getting over" grief as much as it's about digging into the character of grief as lived across landscapes of failed grievance. Indeed, Goines' novels are bleak; his typical third-party narration is characterized by a style of objective naturalistic spectatorship that coats most shocking events in almost clinical description. Goines' writing is so gripping because its luridness, while most graphic and sensational in specific instances, is dulling in its endurance, refusing reprieve. The anticipation of relief is *always* at distant arms-length and is never fully achieved. Indeed, more often than not, the terminal suspension of imposed grief and fleeting pleasure is replaced by untimely, yet in step with Jan Mohammad's concept of the black male as "death bound subject," preordained demise. Every one of Goines 16 novels ends with the death or incarceration of the featured male character (the one important variation in this trend can be found in the "Kenyatta series," which is composed of four novels. Yet the final novel of the continuous story ends with the violent death of the male hero. Detailed discussion of this series and protagonist's death is the feature analysis of this chapter's final section).

While black manhood provides a specified heroism rooted in street savvy magnetism, his protagonists can never fully overtake the myriad impositions their racial and gendered identity shoulder. In effect, racial grief is made and experienced in gendered terms. For instance, the name Whoreson signals in the words of L.H. Stallings the "unadulterated oppression of blackness";<sup>62</sup> Whoreson's life is hemmed in by the condition of his birth. I would add to Stallings' observation that the name Whoreson is indicative of black *males* as inscribed embodied signs of imagined sexual wantonness. As Josef Benson has suggested, following Spillers, the coupling of "son" and "whore" literally name the character as male and female; one whose dislocation from masculine lineage results in the absence of normative masculine endowment.<sup>63</sup> Whoreson's mother, Jessie, when informing the inquiring and soon-baffled doctor

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<sup>61</sup> In one the first scholarly articles to mention Goines, D.B Graham features his critique in relation to Slim whom he deems as "Shakespeare" comparatively. Specifically, Graham see's Slim as capable of divulging the development of an inner phycology that allots readers to follow the transition of the pimp protagonist. Conversely, as is the critique of others, Goines is victim of the classic literary misque of "telling not showing" his reader the internal life of his characters. Graham, "Negative Glamour," 5-18.

<sup>62</sup> Lamonda Horton-Stallings, "I'm Goin' Pimp Whores!: The Goines Factor and the Theory of the Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative," *Word Hustle: Critical Essays and Reflections on the Works of Donald Goines*, eds. Lamonda Horton-Stallings and Greg Thomas (Baltimore: Imprint Editions, 2011), 123.

<sup>63</sup> Josef Benson, "Myths About Pimps: Conflicting Images of Hypermaculine Pimps in U.S American Hip-Hop and Bisexual Pimps in the Novels of Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim," *Journal of Bisexuality* (August 2012): 433. For the essential consideration of black



of the name chosen for her child, states that she wants to name the child “what he is.”<sup>64</sup> The intransigent notion of what her son “is,” suggests that identity is ascribed more so than made, or, perhaps it is made within the echo of its ascribed terms of expectation. Goines locates grief at birth or, indeed, in the gendered racialization that precedes and awaits his male characters at birth.

Whoreson recalls that since adolescence his mother preached, “First be a man, whoreson, *then* be a pimp”<sup>65</sup> (emphasis mine). Her advice suggests that pimping does not, as Neal and other BAM thinkers suggest, compromise manhood and is in fact a prerequisite to its fulfillment. As, according to Whoreson, “pimping is his destiny,” in order to follow her guidance he must firmly believe in his manhood, as any feeling of emasculation would impair his capacity to pursue his purpose. However, the terms of Whoreson’s masculinity are made in partnership of the seemingly irreconcilably dueling logics of his mother and the likes of Neal. For Whoreson, pimping is represented as *both* extension of accomplished manhood *and* compensation for masculine incapacitation. In one telling instance, as his directing mother’s words “rang in his head,” Whoreson attempts to shake loose the self-described “punk’s role” that the “grief” of his “pent up torment” had moments earlier driven him to wailing tears while alone in the shower.<sup>66</sup> In the bare solitude of the bathroom, the showerhead drowning out the audible expressions of his grief, Whoreson’s usually stifled anguish is acknowledged and expressed not through projected anger but through reflective sorrow. Such release of emotional vulnerability is, for a Whoreson, a sign of weakness signaled through homophobic epithet of “punk.” His *temporary* condition as a “punk” signals congruence with Black Arts vernacular in which ephemeral emasculation, or non-sexually specific emasculated state, can be articulated through homophobic epithet. That is to say, Whoreson can temporarily be a punk—or more specifically temporally *act* like a punk, i.e., take on a “punk’s *role*”—by virtue of an emotional state that is brought upon by challenges to his manhood.

Composing himself, a process that requires bottling up the “torment,” Whoreson leaves the privacy of the bathroom to face social dynamics that rely upon his most masculine aptitudes. Upon leaving the bathroom Whoreson proceeds to have “ruthless” sex with Betty, one of his sex workers. Goines is explicit in emphasizing the violence of the sex, noting that Whoreson’s “passion was aroused” by Betty’s active resistance to physical advance. Whoreson describes himself as attempting to “pile-drive my way to the promised land.”<sup>67</sup> The sardonic allusion to iconic Civil Rights rhetoric of the “promised land,” that of nation of racial equality, offers a vision of the distorted psychological effects of Civil Rights failure. Whoreson’s male power, physically and psychologically expressed over Betty, and his masculine grief, anxiety, and torment are conjoined in an act meant to temporally distract and lastingly transported anguish that compromises his vision of masculine selfhood. Whoreson’s “punk’s role” of expressed grief in isolation is overtaken, or at least suspended, by the projection of masculine capability through violent sexual act.

Despite expressions of power and relative wealth Goines’ black male characters are

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undergendering and its restrictions and possibilities of its legacy, see, Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65-81.

<sup>64</sup> Donald Goines, *Whoreson*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1972) 11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

<sup>66</sup> Goines, *Whoreson*, 75-76.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 75-76.

generally forlorn, limited in occupational prospects, and wary of intimacy as the curse of ultimate weakness. Trust, particularly towards women, is a ruse more often than a genuine bond and sex an act of manipulation more than a confirmation of affection. Following the scene described in the previous paragraph, Whoreson awakes to see his two prostitutes gone. Fearing they have abandoned and betrayed him Whoreson describes a viscerally intense “new terror, one that stays with a man who lives off the earning of a women.”<sup>68</sup> He knows that despite the psychological and physical power he holds he is *always* in danger of being compromised by the dependency upon the labor of “his” women. Such anxiety transfers into lingering homosocial constraint within the majority of Goines novels. Men proceed cautiously with one another and while most interactions are blunt in syntax and topic, reasonable suspicions of pretense often disallows full trust, or the reprieve brought by trusted company. For instance, in his fourth novel, *Street Players*, Goines articulates how collective dependency on women as signs of power and means of finance operates to produce tension between men: “There was constant undercurrent of competitiveness between the men in the apartment. None really trusted each other, not where women were concerned. It was great sport for one to end up taking one of his friends girls.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, both within Goines’ “pimp fiction” and other narratives, the prospect of hope and accomplished found in acts of defiance to ascribed limitations are always ultimately extinguished by brutal violent realities.

Ultimately, the exaggerated talents of the lived hero or antihero are overtaken by corporeal vulnerability and the devastating implication of eventuality. Take for instance Prince in *Black Gangster* whose final living moments following a shoot-out with double crossing partner are described as such: “There was nothing heroic in his death, just the passing of a boy who would never live to see 25.”<sup>70</sup> In his passing, Prince shifts from featured figure of exceptional criminal talent to representational victim of a racial and gendered epidemic of black male death. Ultimately for the likes of Prince, the above are not simply exalted traits (although one certainly *could* read them as such) but rather compensatory of those who recognize and adapt to imposition. Goines’ texts seek to corroborate the callousness of reality and do not imagine a transcended reality. The good guy *never* wins, in part because there are seldom-*good guys*, and the world is always too bad to overcome.<sup>71</sup> However, as I will elaborate upon later, this does not necessarily translate to pathologizing black men as innately criminal or sexually delinquent as had at the times of Goines writing recently, albeit infamously, been popularized by Daniel Moynihan. Rather, Goines novels are painful renderings of people maneuvering an immoral world where goodness will get you killed; or more accurately, goodness will get you killed even quicker than *badness*.

Unlike Slim, who wrote both memoirs and fictions in his career, Goines wrote exclusively novels. Goines wrote fiction, albeit prose of gritty realism stirred by events of his life and accounts heard secondhand they were fiction nonetheless. As we will see, the fictional nature of the novels and criminal dealings of Goines’ life is important in considering the intraracial politics of his representation. However, it also important to note that while Goines was dedicated to the exclusive production of novelistic fiction Holloway House staged his writings, starting

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<sup>68</sup> Goines, *Whoreson*, 76-77.

<sup>69</sup> Donald Goines, *Street Players*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1973,) 11.

<sup>70</sup> Goines, *Black Gangster*, 298.

<sup>71</sup> One could argue that *Swamp Man* is a story of successful vengeance—see Greg Thomas’s discussion of the novel in *Word Hustle*.

with his inaugural 1970 novel *Dopefiend* as memoiric survivor tale. In short, *Dopefiend* is the story of two youths' descent into a panoramic nightmare of drug addiction. The back cover description leads with the sentence "FICTION but it's based on personal experience!" Goines' appeal was largely dependent upon the authenticity of his stories. As the *Washington Post* correctly summates, "literary quality isn't his selling point, authenticity is."<sup>72</sup> In turn textual authenticity hinged upon Goines' lived experience serving as a guarantor of veracity. For my purpose, to what extent Goines "lived what he wrote" is of less importance than the implications of consistent assurance of Goines' lived proximity to the exploits of his fictional representations.

Goines relationship to his publisher and their efforts to stage his life and death as "pulled from the pages of one of his books"<sup>73</sup> exists within a long troublesome history of white authentication and black letters. Indeed, the authentication of black authorship provided by white publishers and critics has roots as deep as the history of published African American literature. Slave Narratives almost uniformly included prologues or introductions from white editors or reputable public figures that assured audiences that the text was truly written by the formerly enslaved black author and that the words could be trusted as factual. The original titles of seminal works like Frederick Douglass' (first) and Olaudah Equiano's narratives included the announcement of being, "written by himself." Black personal *experience* operated as testimony and the paramount expression of value for white abolitionist publishers. As William Lloyd Garrison infamously made clear to Frederick Douglass, moral or political analysis beyond the facts of experience would likely lead to white skepticism of experiential legitimacy of the black author. As such, the faculty of black author/victim to relay their personal experience faithfully required the corroboration of an authoritative white figure. Indeed, such a figure, i.e., a politically astute white male, was the one meant to pursue legal grievance on behalf of the black victim via analytical or editorial persuasion.

Of course Goines did not write during a period of formal slavery, but instead in the morphing shadow of what Hartman has called the "afterlife of slavery."<sup>74</sup> Hartman urges the disruption of linear historical narrativity, that of a "before and after" record, in favor of centering the anti-black ethos that governed slavery as an enduring thematic foundation underlying all shifts in national political landscape. In this respect, with the limits of Civil Rights Movement legislation settling onto 1970s post-industrial and increasingly desolate black urban concentrations Goines wrote in a moment that questioned the most pronounced strides of the ostensibly post slavery nation. Goines relationship with Holloway can be read as a shift within standing historical continuity in which politically motivated testimonial of black victimhood at the hands of white crime gave way to white marketing of sensationalized confessionals of black crimes within the context of coerced social conditions.

Goines as illustrative of such a shift was not without some recent informing precedent. Carlo Rotella *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* compellingly stages African American literature of the 1960s, particularly that which gained sizable white readership, as developing thematically and stylistically in the context of social scientist concerns with the racialized "urban crisis." Taking Claude Brown's 1965 *Manchild In A Promise land* as his case

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<sup>72</sup> David Stretfeld, "Book Report: Notes From the Underground," *The Washington Post* September 24, 1989, M15.

<sup>73</sup> This phrasing was used in advertisements for Goines "biography," *Donald Writes No More*.

<sup>74</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007,) 6.

study Rotella argues that the memoir was embraced for essentially narrating affective dimensions of what remained, at root, a structural problem. As much of this dissertation has discussed, the memoir or first-person narrative style was a primary narrative choice of Black Arts writers. Brown's book, and its inclusion within the emerging emphasis on urban ghetto experience of African American literature, was valorized for its "authenticity" in a way comparable to latter writings of key intellectuals like Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson as well as popular memoirs by likes of Sonny Carson and Puerto Rican author, Piri Thomas.<sup>75</sup>

Rotella rightly suggests that such memoirist texts signify a distinct shift away from the dominant Chicago School social science tradition and towards personal narrative as critical documentation of urban racial crisis. Such literature was deemed insiderist and trumpeted as authentic, validated largely through gruff prose and inclusion of vernacular speech. According to Rotella, the terms of this appeal opposed the presumably diluted findings of unwelcome or unequipped scholars and their skewed ethnographic reports. Black memoir was embraced not only, or perhaps not primarily, for literary value but for their role in *exposing* the personal impacts of social crisis. The reception of *Manchild* and its author by literary critics like Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe reflects such conclusions. Mailer and Wolfe heralded Claude Brown as "the first" to provide insight into what "it would be like to have grown up in Harlem."<sup>76</sup> Dick Schnap called *Manchild* a "magnificent book," as it provided "a guided tour of hell."<sup>77</sup> Such reviews and their consistent plastering on the covers of various editions direct us back to Holloway House's sensational efforts to stage Goines as "authentic" documentarian whose chosen medium of fictional novels relayed the events and practices of "Black Experience." Following Rotella, Goines was staged as one who could provide genuine testimonial. Yet Goines deviated from the likes of Claude Brown, as the authenticity of social factualness in Goines books were leveraged as titillating, be it vexing, realist adventures not *strictly* autobiographic.

The most potent example of Holloway's promotion of Goines as authentic street narrator came posthumously. As noted, less than a year after his murder Holloway House published a sensationalized "biography" of their fallen star author titled *Donald Writes No More*. The haphazard biography leveraged the brutal nature of Goines death as evidence of the authenticity of his novels. One advertisement for *Donald Writes No More* reads "Donald Goines, 1936-1974 Addict, thief, pimp, pusher, hoodlum, bootlegger, player...and Writer!"<sup>78</sup> Goines as writer is of *distant* secondary importance to his authenticity as a street hustler of myriad talents. The ellipses that precede the exclamation point-worthy "...and writer!" suggest his authorship as an unexpected addendum to the roll call of his illicit occupations. Writing is staged as the exceptional and unpredictable facility of reflection and artistry of one whose criminality assumedly would void the capacity of such talent. However, importantly, capacity for articulated reflection is positioned as the reader's conduit of Goines' experience and his words as an extension of criminal actions.

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<sup>75</sup> Rotella, Carlo. *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.) 269-293.

<sup>76</sup> Mailer quote is on the front cover, and Wolfe quote is on the inside cover, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, (New York: Signet Books, 1965.)

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, Back cover.

<sup>78</sup> This quote is found in advertisement/order form included in the back of Goines' novel *Kenyatta's Escape* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1974.)

Scholar of American publishing history Samuel Blumenfield was struck by how Goines' depictions of brutal violence reflected, "the everyday life, his own experience of things he could not have just come up with out of the blue."<sup>79</sup> How exactly Blumenfield determined that Goines had been party to injecting a women with a "hotshot" mixture of heroin and battery acid, as happens in *Never Die Alone*, or forcing women to fellate dogs to acquire drugs, as occurs in *Dopefiend*, does not suggest familiarity with Goines' biography. Rather what Blumenfield presumption suggests is that routine "everyday" experience, and not imagination, was the *only* explanation for Goines literary style and storytelling capacity. To be clear, here *experience* is understood to be the embodied phenomenon in which a subject draws on corporal senses, primarily vision, that communicate and facilitate affective appraisal of lived social condition. Joan Scott's discussion of those evaluative inclinations, rooted in historical empiricism, that presume *reality* to be found in the "evidence of experience" is informing.<sup>80</sup> Blumenfield comments reflect how Goines narratives were generally understood as assumedly, and valuably, to borrow from Scott, a "Production, transmission-communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience."<sup>81</sup> According to the words of *Village Voice* book reviewer Michael Covino, included on the back cover of the 2007 reissuing of *Whoreson*, Goines was "the voice of the ghetto"; writing from "ground zero," not as an exceptional individual who had "risen above his background."<sup>82</sup> Comparably, Claude Brown, for instance, was highly acclaimed as an *exceptional* case of one, who in the words of reviewer Dick Schaap, had "broke out" of his environment.<sup>83</sup> Goines remained at street level. While Covino's review, like Blumenfield's evaluation, is rhetorically dramatic it is reflected in the tagline banner, included in all of Goines' books, which dubs him "the master of the Black Experience novel." And indeed, who better to tell of the Black Experience than the Black Experienced?

Holloway House's marketing of Goines as "master of the Black Experience novel" is entrenched in an explicitly reductionist ascription of blackness and conditions of black people's experience. The genre as advertised (not necessarily always as written) is more centered on the *experience of blackness* as embodied sign of various conditions of illicitness as much as it is black people's experience. For instance, one advertisement for Donald Goines' fourteenth novel *Cry Revenge* boasts that Goines' work had "ripped apart the curtain camouflaging black life myth, and fact," revealing a "bloody gut level truth."<sup>84</sup> Or his fourth novel *Street Players* that featured the following assessment from the *New Jersey Voice*: "...His books vividly recreated the street jungle and its predators."<sup>85</sup> A consequence of this wholesale dubbing of blackness via

<sup>79</sup> Samuel Blumenfield, "Epilogue-An Experience in Literary Archaeology: Publishing a Black Lost Generation," *Race, Ethnicity and Publishing in America*, ed. Cecile Cottenet, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014,) 232.

<sup>80</sup> Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (Summer 1991)

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 776.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Covino, Back Cover, *Whoreson*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 2007.)

<sup>83</sup> See *October Cities* discussion of "reform" as a key feature of Brown's narrative and his perceived value to broader political and academic social reform initiatives. .

<sup>84</sup> Goines, *Black Gangster*, 280. *Cry Revenge* was originally published as written by Al C. Clark. Holloway was concerned that with his rate of production that Goines saturating his own brand and asked him to write under a pseudonym. Goines would write five novels under this moniker: *Cry Revenge*, *Crime Partner's*, *Death List*, *Kenyatta's Escape*, and *Kenyatta's Last Hit*.

<sup>85</sup> Donald Goines, *Street Players*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1972) back cover.

language carried over from marketing of Slim/Beck is that abjected qualities of life are attributed to all black people regardless of their lived relationship to sites of supposed Black Experience, and either inform the terms of their blackness or call into question their racial authenticity as displaced from *the* Black Experience. Indeed, there is a lack of space between the stylistic realism of literary *fiction* and the publisher's designation of universal racial *reality* of experience.

As the likes of David Marriot have explored, all fiction is derived from life in the sense that fiction does draw upon, and registers in relationship to, bodily senses and corresponding cognitive responses that make experience. Yet Marriot, along a similar vein as Joan Scott, poses analytical concerns regarding reductive readings practices associated with experiential "evidence," arguing that fiction also promises potential affective access beyond but generated from "real life" experience. In the words of Frederic Wertham, from whom Marriot extends his discussion, "literary creation is not a *translation* but a *transmutation* of human experience"<sup>86</sup> (emphasis mine). Wertham suggests that literary fiction may allow affective access to an experience that a reader doesn't actually physically experience in life. However, in Holloway House's promotion of specifically *the black* experience (suggesting the singular) we see the space between the experiential, that of embodied, and the textual, that of representation of the embodied, pulled taut by the ostensive decisiveness of blackness *as* experiential. It would seem that literature as transmutation of experience, as Wertham names it, is meant to be understood to be transmission of experience, as Joan Scott warns. Consequently, the line between author and text, like John Killens' initial critique suggests, is rendered indistinct by the conceived meaning of blackness as specified *experience* which both the writer and his written words are held in reference.

For Holloway and Goines, the implied word between "black" and "experience" is *man* and, more specifically, an urban streetwise heterosexual black man. Male writers and their male protagonists dominated the genre in the 1970s. As Nishikawa rightly emphasizes, the racial authenticity of characters was mediated by the performance of a specific variant of masculinity.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the authenticity of the story was buttressed, and in the case of Goines ensured, by the premise that the author's personal experience was of congruent authentic masculinity. Black masculinity is represented as compensatory survivalist response to ascriptions of racial and gendered limitation. That is to say, masculinity is both the threat that denies black men wide social accesses and that which promotes a particular circumscribed agency within black and illegal networks. As is the case with masculinity of all embodied hues and social standings sex and violence operate as core expressions of (in)capacity. As noted, to the Black Experience hero sex is quite often an emotionally detached act wielded to ensure the psychological dependence of one's partner and violence represents the most dependable final means of any conflict

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<sup>86</sup> Fredric Wertham, *Dark Legend: A Study in Murder*, (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941,) 249. For David Marriot's discussion see Chapter 3 "Derived From Life: Race, Childhood and Culture," in *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.)

<sup>87</sup> Kinohi Nishikawa, "Reading the Street: Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines and the Rise of Black Pulp Fiction," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010).

resolution.<sup>88</sup> Again, sex and violence, and indeed comparable expressions of sex and violence, are key components to constructions of national masculinity at large. However, in case of the Black Experience novel such masculinity functions to ensure proof of experiential racial authenticity of both the fictional character and author. Further, experiential authenticity was heavily relied upon in the genre's self-identification and promotion.

### **Readership, Reception and Donald Goines' Place(lessness) in the Canon**

It would be incorrect to fully bifurcate publisher from author in shaping meaning of Black Experience novels. What can be understood as exploitative white publishing practices can at once be understood as authorial acts of self-definition. Nishikawa poignantly refers to the black pulp fictions as providing a black folk literary "affective affirmation of their lives as marginalized subject."<sup>89</sup> As is often true, particularly in popular cultural discourses that center black men, the line between ascriptions of innate social delinquency and willful resistance in the context of coerced condition can appear lean and vacillate based upon the evaluation of the consumer. Holloway House may have, in the words of Ishmael Reed, seen "black pathology as big business."<sup>90</sup> Yet the authors, many of whom found Holloway to be one of the few venues that offered to publish their writing, engaged in the project of producing literature that told the stories of, and provided literature to, a specific black population generally neglected by publishers or even disregarded as effectively illiterate. Dennis Chester argues that Goines, and I would add Black Experience novels generally, "captured the popular Black imagination in a way that many more "serious" works did not and, as a result, engages with and challenges the attitudes and ideologies associated with his contemporaries."<sup>91</sup> Such "serious contemporaries" certainly include Black Arts authors as the movement, despite its explicit anti-elitism, constituted a literary and intellectual petit bourgeoisie relative to popular fiction novels. Holloway House author and former participant of the Watts Writer workshop, Odie Hawkins, describes the genre as such: "The Black Experience is about the ghetto and roaches, the African-American experience is about something else... Many, many African-Americans have never had the Black Experience."<sup>92</sup> Hawkins' quote points to a number of intraracial distinctions that shaped black authenticity as established through comparative inauthentic black experiences. First, quite simply, the "black experience" is one of impoverishment and daily degradation. However, the African-American experience is something else. Hawkins does not state what it is exactly, but he does make clear that it is *not* the "black experience." Accordingly, blackness is rooted in a specific type of experience, which carries claims of racial authenticity that does not equally cut

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<sup>88</sup> It should be noted that this is not a wholesale truth about the Holloway House catalogue. Indeed, Goines himself wrote a novel about and from the viewpoint of a young black woman, *Black Girl Lost*. Moreover, as Gifford notes the genre dynamics have shifted in last few decades of Street Lit and black women have emerged as consistent protagonists in the genre of Street Literature. See chapter six of Gifford's *Pimping Fictions*, "The Women of Street Literature: Contemporary Black Crime Fiction and the Rise of the Self-Publishing Marketplace," for discussions of the role of women in the contemporary genre of Street Lit.

<sup>89</sup> Nishikawa, "Reading the Street," 40.

<sup>90</sup> Ishmael Reed, "The Black Pathology Biz," *The Nation*, November 20, 1989, 597-598.

<sup>91</sup> Dennis Chester, "By Certain Codes: Structures of Masculinity in Donald Goines's *Daddy Cool*," *Word Hustle*, 95.

<sup>92</sup> Gilstrap, "The House that Blacks Built," 88.

across racial identity but is instead subject to intraracial fissure. African American and black are understood not as synonyms but rather as terms that are associated in a manner where their overlap, that of ancestry and phenotype, reveals the nature of their experiential distinction.

The category of Black Experience book, and often-sensational promotional rhetoric, might seemingly imply the marketing of extraordinary stories of otherness to a non-black readership. However, this was largely not the case. A black urban reading class made up the vast majority of those who consumed Holloway House Black Experience novels. The marketing and literary/scholarly reception of these novels, Goines in particular, compared to the populist readership of the novels reveals a striking racialized impasse between publisher and writer as well as between publisher and reader. As noted, that

ay could market novels as adventures through specifically *black male* delinquency and black audiences could purchase the same novels as faithful renderings of exceptional social realities, is a revealing contradiction. This contradiction implies the objective failure of designations like pathology and authenticity, outside of the subjective evaluation of the reader. The relationship between publisher, author, and audience was not as linear as the cultural nationalist paradigm that emphasizes autonomous institutional production presumed. Certainly, Holloway House's classification and marketing of the literature, and treatment of its writers, can be interrogated for the exploitation of black authors (and blackness at large). Yet, such interrogation does not unseat the fact that Holloway served as an outlet for black urban literary cultural expression and as one of the most steadfast resources for black working-class readership.

Holloway Press trumpeted Goines as "America's most popular Black Writer." The subjective nature of "popularity" makes such a claim difficult to confirm or deny particularly as the widespread admiration for Goines is counter weighted by the objection of a slim, but prominent, sect of readers. However, if a writer's popularity is measured by demand and sales the claim is, at least, tenable. Goines wrote an incredible 16 novels over the span of less than five years! The cocktail of being Holloway's most in-demand writer, their paltry publishing deals, and the financial demands of drug addiction charged his prolific output. In life and death Goines' novels were/are read at a notable rate. A 2004 interview with NPR Goines biographer Eddie B. Allen, Jr. cites Goines as having sold between five and ten million books.<sup>93</sup> Candice Love Jackson estimates seven million sold.<sup>94</sup> Samuel Blumfield says 1.5 million.<sup>95</sup> Popular culture scholar Matthew Schneider-Mayerson boldly states that the Goines novels tally the highest total sales of any African American writer in history!<sup>96</sup> According to the *New York Times*, as of 2004, Holloway House Publishing co-founder Bentley Morris boasted estimates of 200,000 in yearly

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<sup>93</sup>Tony Cox. Interview with Eddie B. Allen, "Recalling the Work of Author Donald Goines," NPR, Author Interviews, December 21, 2004, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4238745>

<sup>94</sup> Candice Love Jackson, "From writer to reader: black popular fiction," *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, eds. Maryeema Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 659.

<sup>95</sup> Blumfield, "Epilogue-An Experience in Literary Archaeology: Publishing a Black Lost Generation," 241.

<sup>96</sup> Mathew Schneider-Mayerson, "Popular Fiction Studies: The Advantages of a New Field," *Studies in Popular Culture* 33.2 (2010): 28.



sales.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Goines has never been out of print. In 1997 major publisher W.W. Norton, as part of a series titled “Old School Classics,” published Goines novel *Daddy Cool*. In 2008, street literature powerhouse Kensington Publishing purchased Goines’ entire collection and published them under the banner, “Holloway House Classics.” His forty-seven years in print, the varying estimates regarding book sales, drug addiction, unsolved murder, and his iconic status amongst a reading audience dismissed by racist and classist assumptions (particularly his vast and lasting prison readership, see endnote 28 for details) contribute to Goines’ mystique. These features may, however, also likely inform his marginalization in scholarly circles. In turn, the exclusion from academia reveals BAM’s compliance with terms of literary elitism.

In the earliest, and thus necessarily pivotal, piece of scholarship devoted solely to Goines work Greg Goode summates, “With respect to the standards of literature, the books of Donald Goines are not considered sub literary, for they are not even considered.”<sup>98</sup> Save for a single chastising article published in *Obsidian II* in 1975 and a sparse littering of subpar evaluations found in small regional newspapers, Goode was effectively accurate when he wrote that sentence in 1984. Moreover, Goode’s sentiment remains largely accurate in 2016. Despite Greg Thomas and L.H. Stallings centering Goines problematic marginality in the 2011 edited volume *Word Hustle: Critical essays on the Words of Donald Goines*, such efforts remain an aberration. Goines is still a emblematic afterthought that sits curiously on the margins of what is considered reputable literature by the majority of literary scholars. However, perhaps it is not a matter of being ignored but rather the implications of being ignored by *the people who matter*. In the last decade Goines is experiencing enthusiastic fresh interest in African American Literary studies in the work of Justin Gifford, Kinohi Nishikawa, and the aforementioned excellent edited collection of L.H. Stalling and Greg Thomas. As Kennan Norris’s edited collection *Street Lit* suggests the rise of contemporary “urban/street lit” has sparked an interest in tracking a lineage of the genre and considering the influence of its originating authors. As a result of this historiography Goines

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<sup>97</sup> Lola Ogunnaike, “Credentials for Pulp Fiction: Pimp and Drug Addict; For the Novelist Donald Goines, Dead 30 Years, New Popularity and a Movie,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2004. [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/25/movies/credentials-for-pulp-fiction-pimp-drug-addict-for-novelist-donald-goines-dead-30.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/25/movies/credentials-for-pulp-fiction-pimp-drug-addict-for-novelist-donald-goines-dead-30.html?_r=0)

<sup>98</sup> Greg Goode, “From Dopefiend to Kenyatta’s Last Hit: The Angry Black Crime Novels of Donald Goines,” *Melus* 11.3: 42.

increasingly finds himself a progenitor of a new canon-building rather than an outlier.<sup>99</sup> However, dedicated study of Goines remains irregular in the field of literature.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the political project of bringing African American literature into the purview of whitewashed academia and the literary milieu the field has reconstituted prevailing terms of literary merit. African American Literature found its institutional bearings through the construction of literary history, the development of a canon of great works, and the advancement of disciplinary specific literary theory. It was debates, most notably featuring Houston A. Baker and Henry Louis Gates, regarding the nature of literary aesthetic and the role of the scholar in determining literary quality in the 1980s that promoted a pronounced academic canonization of African American literature.<sup>101</sup> As Joyce A. Joyce forewarned, these debates and the post-structuralist theories that permeated from them, while greatly championing vernacular folk aesthetics as elemental to a definable black aesthetic and literary tradition, it was also the case that some folk expression, namely Black Pulp fiction, went unmentioned. Susan Dietzel argues that academic architects of the African American literary canon's adherence to prevailing New

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<sup>99</sup> One wonders if such a project, while certainly one of literary recovery, may in turn result in marginalization of less known pulp fiction authors and works. Indeed, as the marginality of the likes of Slim and Goines suggest that the restrictive terms of canonization are not the monopoly of any one race of scholars or genre of literature.

<sup>100</sup> While until relatively recently Goines has received insufficient attention in literary scholarship he holds a distinguished, or at least central, position in Hip-Hop studies and Prison studies. Goines is celebrated in two of the most racialized spaces in America, which serve as twin pillars in discourses of contemporary black masculinity and racial authenticity. Predictability, it is only in the field of Hip-Hop Studies and Prison Studies that Goines finds any consistent mention, let alone ascribed clout. Greg Thomas charts male hip-hop artists oft citing of Goines, from west coast martyr Tupac to east coast prophetic lyricist Nas, as an inspiration both personally and artistically. New York City rapper DMX produced and starred as King David in the 2004 cinematic adaptation of Goines novel *Never Die Alone*. DMX in the foreword to Eddie Allen's biography of Goines, *Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines*, mentions that he first hears of Goines when he was incarcerated. Indeed, scholars of prison and rehabilitation studies such as Bruce Franklin, Suzanna Conrad, and Stephanie F. Guerra note that Goines, alongside Slim, is a most requested author in prison libraries nationwide. Such studies reveal that the popularity of Goines among inmates is used to encourage development of literacy. However, in some cases his popularity has also promoted evaluation resulting in the novels being deemed unsuitable for the rehabilitation process and banned by prison libraries. A number of Goines' novels feature protagonists recently released from prisoner, one novel, *White Man's Justice*, *Black Man's Grief*, takes places entirely in prison and all of his novels engage communities in which prison, and specter of white judicial power is an omnipresent worry for those in the black community.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Awkward, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Barbara Christian and most prominently Joyce A. Joyce all importantly engaged in the discussion of the African American literary theory and canon production. However, Gates and Baker were the key feuding figures their published debates served as reference from which a range of scholars weighed in on the terms and stakes of African American literary theory.

Criticism notions of high and low art has resulted in the marginalization of “popular fiction.”<sup>102</sup> Less generous, but still accurate, appraisals from the likes of Gerald Early, Kennan Norris and L.H. Stallings suggest that African American literary history and canon building academics have spurned Goines and Black Pulp Fiction as unsavory and unworthy of serious consideration.<sup>103</sup> The necessary pushback against the long-standing exclusion of African American authors and intellectuals came with the production of a new set of exclusions. Indeed, canon-building is always a project tied to textual exclusion evoked by the subjective critique of canon builders. The question is not will texts be excluded, but *which* texts are excluded and *why*?

That the majority of scholars have failed to consider Goines is not terribly surprising. He wrote pulp paperbacks that received inadequate editing and nearly no high profile promotion from a niche-publishing agency. Goines’ predictable disregard by the majority of literary scholars points me to his intriguing disregard by, and *perhaps* obliviousness of, Black Arts theorists. The university scholar was the apex of western institutional intellectualism, which the Black Arts thinker despaired of as being entrenched in paradigms irrelevant and misleading to black people. That such a figure would not register, comprehend, or admire the text of a former felon and heroin-addicted author who hurriedly penned yarns of eroticism and murder was confirmation of assumed elitism. However, what is one to conclude when the cultural vanguard of the urban street folk makes no mention, or occasionally issues momentary rebuke, of literature *they*, black male folk, read? Could politics of respectability, those so deplored in the mores of the Uncle Tom and mimetic Negro authors, have crept into the radical agenda of BAM? And could these politics have spurred a silence toward Goines? It is to these questions that I now turn.

#### *Donald Goines and the Black Art of Silence*

That academics and those of the literary elite had not read Goines, or did not have regard for him, is somewhat expected. However, that BAM thinkers would share in this lack of non-engagement is not. Goines and the genre that he dominated seems ripe for Black Arts praise for its representation of black urban plight and humanization of the criminalized lumpen, or perhaps more likely, condemnation for peddling supposedly archetypal representations of black male depravity. Yet, at least explicitly, we get neither. Unlike the swaggering rhetoric hurled at other intraracial male foes we hear something rare, silence. Indeed, when considering Black Arts’ masculine tensions *silence* is significant and telling because it is an uncommon form of intraracial homosocial address. Silence is not *necessarily* a verification of obliviousness or lack of opinion, rather it is a pointed aberrance in which anticipated rhetoric, such as that discussed in previous chapters, is tellingly unfound. Taking BAM’s non-address as a distinct form of address I suggest that Goines employed black masculinity that challenged Black Arts cultural politics of masculine heroism and evoked this distinct, and curious, discursive response. The silence towards Goines gestures to dynamic of interracial homosocial boundary building from the opposite end of the spectrum and distinct from the cardinal terms of rhetorical disavowal we have seen stretching across the rhetorical border to this point.

<sup>102</sup> Susanne B. Dietzel, “The African American Novel and Popular Culture,” *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 156-173.

<sup>103</sup> Gerald Early, “What is African American Literature?” *Street Lit: Representing the Urban Landscape*, ed Kennan Norris (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 3-9; Kennan Norris, “Street Lit[erature] in American Past and Present,” in *Street Lit*, xix-xxix; L.H. Stallings, “Introduction: Word Hustle,” in *Word Hustle*, 11-33.

The undertaking of silence as specific mode of discursive address and site of analysis merits brief remark. Susan Sontag poignantly wrote, “silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech.”<sup>104</sup> The centrality of Sontag’s statement, made alongside comparable sentiments of scholars like George Steiner and Ihab Hassan, suggests that silence as a modern motif of articulation is not vacant of meaning but is one that cannot be assumed in meaning. Along this reasoning, uncertainty is silence’s discursive potential, as it is not tethered to the constraints of specified linguistic signs. Silence slips the grasp of specificity that is, while full of its own complications, subject to syntactical implication in the realm of semiotics. Silence calls attention to and resists the trappings of the limitations of speech and writing. That silence is an intentional form of communication for a rhetorically performative aesthetic within BAM’s reception of Goines is unlikely. However, silence suggests the failure of those noisier rhetorical tropes so handy for questioning racial and masculine authenticity in so many contexts to disavow Goines or the experience of his male subjects.

As explored in chapter three, African American authors who supposedly mimicked white literary tendencies received the brunt of Black Arts criticism. Such authors, alongside out-casted faggots and uncle toms, shape the intraracial boundary of the scapegoated emasculated. However, the non-address of Donald Goines indicates a counter-intuitive ascription to prevailing literary politics that deemed Goines’ work “low brow,” crude, and outside the schema of literary consideration. However, for BAM the quality of writing, or merits of literary style, is not the central imperative but rather the political project of Black Experience work. Indeed, Goines’ entrenchment in black urban vernacular would seemingly align him with Black Aesthetic standards in the processes’ development. Yet it is Goines’ narrative and political aims that sully the potential congruence of his literary style. It is the expectation that black masculinity, through communal and familial patriarchy, transcend racial and gendered grief into political and civic grievance that stands at the crux of Goines’ exclusion from BAM. With this in mind, the silence toward Goines as black folk author far removed from the mainstream scene or black literary elite suggests a limit to terms of racial and masculine authentication. Again, in an “anti-textual textual movement” it is important to declare that my contention is not the BAM participants never *discussed* Goines; such a matter is beyond the scope of my work, but rather that major texts, i.e., lasting multi-volume journals, anthologies, and central critics whose influence shaped BAM discourse, did not discuss Goines in print.

Could Black Arts thinkers have simply not been aware of the work of Goines? That prominent BAM thinkers would be *unaware* of one of the most prolific and widely read black writers is improbable. Yet the implication of this possibility merits brief consideration. The fact that Goines was published by a small press and that his popularity was, originally, somewhat regional in nature did deter him from wide-scale mainstream notoriety initially. One of the hallmarks of Goines’ folkloric status, as well as one of the difficulties of pursuing scholarship on him as folk icon, is the lack of standard “evidence” regarding the breadth of his readership and terms of influence (references within hip-hop music make up the largest archive of chronicled mention of Goines).<sup>105</sup> Goines slips the grasp of the standard markers of literary heritage and achievement chronicled by reviews, well-kept book sales, and scholarly critics. While such a

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<sup>104</sup> Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” 11.

<sup>105</sup> For some considerations of Goines impact on hip-hop, see Greg Thomas, “16 Novels and a Microphone” in *Word Hustle*, 201-209; and Tracy Grant, “Why Hip-Hop Heads Love Donald Goines,” *Black Issues Book Review*, vol. 3.5 (Sep. 2001): 52.

paradox confirms Goines' status at the fringe of the traditional archives, it also confirms BAM as either a willing or unaware participant in the production of his marginality. Indeed, obliviousness to Goines would suggest a telling rift in BAM's vanguard position and its populist aim. If BAM were unaware of Goines' work it would mean that they were ignorant to the largest collection of black novels being made available. Furthermore, such unawareness would entail obliviousness to the literature that a great deal of black *folk*, men folk specifically, was reading. Such isolated elitism was a core critique of white and mimetic black thinkers who were condemned as disconnected from reality and thus unequipped to think representatively about "the people." In part, this may have been a matter of wrongful presumptions regarding what *mediums* "folks" read.

*Death of the Novel: BAM and the Presumed Habits of Folk Readership*

While the cultivation of an urban black readership was primary to the political project of cultural nationalism, the novel form held a precarious, even dubious, relationship to the objectives of Black Arts literature. The principle that art functions to induce nationalist racial consciousness entailed a twist of Marxist-like orientation toward the novel as a distinctly anti-revolutionary medium. It was supposed that the novel did not retain the same quick visceral punch of poems, songs, or performance pieces. Furthermore, novels required a sustained individual engagement deemed uncondusive to the immediate demands of daily life and the urgency of revolution. However, unlike traditional Marxist thought, the belief was that the novel, being a product for the upper class, was a white medium. James Smethurst summarizes BAM's racialization of the novel, "African culture (and the culture of the black folk in the United States) were essentially oral and musical and that Western cultures were literate—and that the novel exemplified the Western approach to literature."<sup>106</sup> Black Arts writer Haki Mubatai (at the time known as Don E. Lee) would state this position clearly: "We as black poets and writers are aware of the fact that the masses (and I do not use the word lightly for I am part of the masses) of black people, *do not read books*; that is, they don't read very large and extensive works of fiction or non-fiction."<sup>107</sup>

This is not to say novels were not written in the Black Arts era, or written in the vein of its aesthetics and political principles. Authors that included John Killens, John A. Williams, Rolland Jefferson, Sam Greenlee, and Cecil Brown all produced novels that certainly uphold qualities and aspirations of Black Arts poetry and essays. Recently, the independent publishing house The Coffee House Press published "The Black Arts Movement Series," which sought to emphasize the role of the novel, which the editorial panel recognized as being underemphasized in relation to other mediums in contributing to the Black Arts Movement. However, these novels are generally an afterthought as they were, as Rolland Murray puts it, "dwarfed in scale and influence by the volumes of poetry and drama that were produced at the same time."<sup>108</sup> Poetry in particular, but also often the essay and drama, were more convenient for independent black publishers who recognized that literary content and means of production as intimately tied in Nationalist efforts.

BAM theorists were concerned that novels represented a "high culture" medium meant for bourgeoisie consumption. Although, this is ironic in the case of Goines whose popularity

<sup>106</sup> Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*. 90

<sup>107</sup> Don L. Lee, "Directions for Black Writers," *The Black Scholar* 1.2 (December 1969): 55.

<sup>108</sup> Murray, *Our Living Manhood*, 8.

rendered him “low.” Historically, such class and overlapping racial presumptions of novel consumption were not wholly unfounded. The novel was indeed a medium predominantly engaged by those with the means, education, and leisure time of the elite. However, the emergence of WWI-era paperback fiction, generally printed on the lowest grade of paper, *pulp*, altered the landscape of literary audiences as the middle and lower class began to read at an unprecedented rate. If these texts in the words of Paula Rabinowitz “brought modernism to Main Street,” they also brought it to *those* streets (that today might simply be called *the street*, with all racialization implied) that main street dwellers avoided. However, Goines’ novels were certainly not mimics of the prose or publishing practices of European high modernist texts. Rather these novels were written, packaged, and sold with the masses in mind. While Rabinowitz does not discuss Goines specifically she argues that paperbacks were a fundamentally democratic intervention in the previous expectations and practices of literary production as necessarily a high art for the higher-ups. In short, novels like those written by Goines unseated classist claims, which BAM endorsed, regarding the constraints of readership.

BAM conceptions of literatures political function implied not only sullied literature but also potential psychology damage of readers. The question of which strand of compromise came first, or better still, which holds more weight in the dialectic, remains a vacillating quandary in the Black Arts. The black writer’s role as voice of the people or a voice to awaken the people is subject to debate and contradiction across writers and time. Nevertheless, Smethurst rightly emphasizes the importance of audience in the production of literary meaning within the Black Arts context: “meaning could not exist independent of an audience and that audience was an essential feature in creating meaning.”<sup>109</sup> Following such logic, while the novels are *meant* to confirm the experience of the readers, the response of the readers in turn confirms the objective of the text, particularly in a consumer market-driven genre like pulp fiction.

### **Grief and Grievance: Goines Unrelenting Reality, The *Kenyatta Series* and BAM’s Missing Masculine Hero**

The pervasive uncertainty toward the novel form may have impacted the terms of BAM production. The popularity of Goines’ novels in relation to the comparatively smaller readership of BAM would have discouraged notions of a secured general readership. In this respect, Goines’ popularity amongst a black male urban readership would seem to force BAM to reconcile its position between populism and vanguardism and relinquish a claim to the pulse of “the people” at the core of their racial authenticity. Nonetheless, as noted, it is nearly impossible to imagine the majority of Black Arts thinkers being ignorant of Goines’ work. While Goines became a local celebrity in Detroit, Broadside Press rose to prominence in the same city. Moreover, journals like *The Black Scholar* were aware of Holloway House publications. In 1968, there appears an article that considers Louis Lomax’s Holloway House-published study of the assassination of Malcolm X, *To Kill a Black Man*, and there is a mention in the “Book Roundup” series that makes a passing endorsement of other, non-Goines, titles.<sup>110</sup> It is far more likely that prominent Black Art thinkers knew exactly what was written by Goines but chose not to engage it in their published

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<sup>109</sup> Smethurst, “Let the World Be a Black Poem”: Some Problems of Recollecting and Editing Black Arts Texts,” *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race Since 1850*, eds. George Hutchinson and John K. Young, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013,) 186.

<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, by the early ‘80s, his most classic works became mainstays in the reoccurring “Round Up” and “List of Black Books of Interests” sections in *The Black Scholar*.

critiques. The reasons for this explicit silence can be theorized at sites of passing oblique dismissals. For instance, Baraka's sentiments in the following quote from 1973: "Because someone can summon up the reality of black life doesn't mean that it's politically true. This fad of talking about whores, and junkies and pimps! We who have a revolutionary commitment have to transform reality, if not, we are enemies of the people."<sup>111</sup>

It is not clear that Baraka is writing specifically about Goines. The context of the *Jet* article suggests he is speaking most concretely about the state of black film. However the specifics of Baraka's castigation, and as previously noted the thematic overlaps between black popular fiction and film, suggest Goines' inclusion and likely his prominence amongst those "enemies of the people" in the realm of popular black literature (It is worth noting that Goines moved to Los Angeles with the ambition to break into screenwriting at the height of the Blaxploitation era). Baraka's lack of specificity suggests the lack of any distinguishable individual authorial capacity in the genre. As in any "fad," individuality is obscured by the unitary terms of one's inclusion in the trend. In other words, it is the trend, not the trendy that is of more central concern. Nonetheless, if one acknowledges the primacy of Goines in this variant of critique of cultural production, the initial formative question arising from Baraka's quote is: How can "black life" at once be "reality" and politically untrue? It would seem that what Baraka is getting at is that the content *is true* but that the Black Artist has a duty to renovate reality in the interest of specific political end. The statement implies that reality is not *meant* to be represented in a hyper-realist sense if that realism does not slide into a speculative reality beyond the limits of its current state. Maulana Karenga, with whom Baraka had only recently parted ways, expressed similar sentiments toward popular culture, namely the blues as teaching "resignation, in a word acceptance of reality-and we have come to change reality."<sup>112</sup> In the parlance of scholar Gershun Avilez, for the Black Arts writer revolutionary change "was possible but not promised."<sup>113</sup> The artists of "revolutionary commitment" were charged with catalyzing transformation. What is important here is that for Baraka, reality within works by the likes of Goines is at least *in part* rejected as non-beneficial. More specifically, the Black writer's duty is to dwell in re-ordering reality only as long as necessary to capture the aesthetic pulse and attentive ear of those who require the liberatory effects of political transformation. Whereas the Uncle Tom, faggot, or mimetic Negro author all perverted black reality to the point where each of their relative productions was not reflective of authentically black reality, these authors (and filmmakers in the case of the *Jet* article) dwell in authentic black reality as a state of finality.

As chapter three has detailed, the anxiety of poetic inaction was the Anglo Saxon apparition lurking around every comma for Black Arts writers. Conversely, the Black Experience novels, which could hardly be said to strictly follow the guidelines BAM sketched of white literary aesthetics, served as evidence of a black aesthetic inertia. These novels were perversion of possibility at their most concentrated. Not the emasculated upper crust or sexually disordered, but the lumpen masculine, both writer and reader, not writing or reading as they *should*. Black Arts writers thought the poverty of the black urban underclass, particularly that of men, was the

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<sup>111</sup> Baraka is quoted in, "Playwright Baraka Seeks Responsibility In More Black Movies," *Jet*, March 29, 1973, 62.

<sup>112</sup> Maulana Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 36.

<sup>113</sup> Gershun Avilez, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Cambridge Companion of American Civil Rights Literature*, ed. Julie Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 49-65.

hub Black Experience from which their art was meant to expose and transform those realities. It was the expectation that black masculinity, through communal and familial patriarchy, could transcend racial and gendered grief that stands at the crux of Goines' incongruity from BAM.

As Harper has shown, even in the most crisis-laden BAM works, texts in which the prospect of black revolution is dim, *the call* for change is issued and the author remains a vestige of possibility. Returning to Avilez, while nothing is necessarily promised by the call for action, the author of the appeal remains the holdout for a different reality that might follow its call. Harper properly cites Baraka's "S.O.S" as archetypically exhibiting the motif of a simultaneous emergency and the prospect of an unanswered revolutionary call:

Calling black people  
 Calling all black people, man woman child  
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in  
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling  
 You, calling all black people  
 Calling all black people, come in, black people, come  
 on in.<sup>114</sup>

Harper points out the poem *only* calls upon black people and never shifts to the implications of the call's reception. Harper understands the perpetual dial tone response to the poem's call as indicating the self-imposed limits of BAM's nationalist ambitions: the defining of blackness by way of others' non-blackness or unachieved blackness as ironically disallowing the nationalist collective supposedly advocated. Of course, Harper's reading stands as foundational to this dissertation. However what the poem and Harper's reading also suggest is that *possibility* is the implied impetus of the call. More specifically, that such possibility sprang from the enlightened speaker. Furthermore, the emergency associated with an SOS call reminds us that the movement hinged on such possibility emerging from crisis. Black Arts work identified the shame of black repression, particularly that of black male emasculation, as the revelatory site of emergent empowered personal consciousness and transformation of material conditions.

Certainly, Goines did not offer the *same* possibility of transformation. For Goines, literary grievance seems to be a false pretense of political naivety. Conversely, grief is a lived reference and binding landscape of his literary fantasy. Grievance is the ultimate imperative of the African American protest novel tradition. Grievance presupposes that something about the world, as it is socially determined, is potentially redeeming and capable of socially catalyzed reform; for Goines it is not.<sup>115</sup> While BAM does not tend to be associated with reform, but rather with revolution, the same core principle applies: possibility for agentive subjectivity and social recognition can exist as the result of restructuring the terms of political legibility. Racial abjection in various articulations serves as a signpost of the implied prospect of the societal restoration. Coerced racial distress is thus the generative motif that urges social reform. Repression is posed as temporary *condition* to prompt reformation. Quite simply, the world

<sup>114</sup> Amiri Baraka, "S.O.S.," "S.O.S." In *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, edited by William J. Harris, 218. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991, 1968.

<sup>115</sup> Perhaps the closest Goines ever gets to explicit advocating of reform is in the "angry preface" in which he discussed the specific equities of bail bonds in his 1973 novel on prison life, *White Man's justice, Black Man's Grief*. Also, while *Whoreson* concludes with Jones incarcerated without any timeline for release he expresses regret and desire for reform.



could be better. Susanne Dietzel argues that Goines' work offers a confirmation of "readers' immediate circumstances and environment"; moreover, and less intuitively to my reading, that he grants them possibility to imagine resistance.<sup>116</sup> Dietzel's "resistance," although never concretely defined, is implied to exist in material acts of rebellion against ascription to racial abjection, i.e., police shootouts, out-smarting exploitative partners, duping white racists, etc.

*Word Hustle* keys in on the same conception of resistance and invests largely in rescuing Goines from standing perceptions of his novels as entrenched in exploitation or nihilism by reading for resistant politics. Candice Love Jackson contribution reads Goines famed four-book *Kenyatta Series* collection as linking the black American condition, and prospect for liberation, to the burgeoning movements for Third World liberation and anti-colonialism. In Jackson's reading Goines stages black America as what Robert Allen would call an "internal colony," and advisedly chooses Third World independence movements, not the Civil Rights Movement, as the reoccurring reference from which the efforts of the novels' hero, Kenyatta, are drawn. From the protagonist name, a tribute to Kenyan freedom fighter Jomo Kenyatta, to his attempt to hijack a plane to fly to Algeria in the series' third novel, *Kenyatta's Escape*, a nod to 1972 hijacking of a plane by members of the Black Liberation Army, Love plots Goines' consistent allusions to global black revolution. Andrew Sargent reads Goines prison narrative, *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief*, for representations of interracial homosexual rape as drawing attention to the racial and gendered inequities of burgeoning "law and order" politics as well as homosocial power dynamics within carceral spaces. *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief* is structurally a bit of an outlier in Goines' collection. While still rooted in Goines' hyperrealist prose the novel lacks a strict linear storyline that usually pushes his narrative. Rather the novel reads as kind a harrowing maze detailing prison life as observed by narrator Chester Hines (a likely, but never confirmed reference to progenitor of Black crime fiction, and former prison author, Chester Himes). In Sargent's words, the novel's most telling goal lies in exposing "the cause and effect relationship between the privileged racial position of whiteness in the institutional hierarchy of the criminal justice system (cause) and the sexual victimization of the "minority" white male prisoner in the jail (effect)."<sup>117</sup> Sargent reads the reoccurring graphic scenes of black men raping "white boys"<sup>118</sup> detailed by non-participating but watchful black incarcerated narrator as leveraging Goines' patented naturalism to depict corporeal instances of gruesome white male victimization within the scope of systemic judicial "rape" of black men.<sup>119</sup> This scholarship is a vital pushback against standing perception. Such arguments, particularly those in *Word Hustle*, are indeed compelling and provide crucial readings against presumptions of Goines as non-political. Yet these readings are indebted to a specific iteration of resistance, by and large masculine in embodiment and character, that ultimately are pulled back into a standing political

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<sup>116</sup> Susanne B. Dietzel, "The African American Novel and Popular Culture," *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 162.

<sup>117</sup> Andrew Sargent, "Representing Prison Rape: Race, Masculinity and Incarceration in Donald Goines *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief*," in *Word Hustle*, 173.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 173.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 181. While Sargent does not directly make references, this line of argument is well-extended back across African American literature by Marlon Ross in his essay "Race, Rape, Castration: Feminist Theories of Sexual Violence and Masculine Strategies of Black Protest," *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions* (2002): 305-43.

schema predicated on terms of social recognition, various forms of legal systemic inequity, and political agency that Goines establishes as resolutely anti-black.

To my reading, Goines representation of black masculine resistance signals a critical disruption to Civil Rights and Black Power era ideals of speculative possibility. Neither reformative nor transformative Goines grants possibilities of multiple types of resistance, from paramilitary tactics to criminal enterprise, within dire contexts and without promise of reprieve. Goines' male protagonists *always* ultimately die violently or conclude in a state of desperation.<sup>120</sup> Jerry Bryant has suggested that simply reading the utter corruption of Goines' landscapes would prompt one to believe that the world was in need of desperate overhaul. This *may* be true but importantly what Bryant's point entails is that the texts call for hope *because it offers failure*. To highlight this when one turns to Goines' more overtly political novels, one does not find him moving closer to the imperatives of Black Arts revolution but leveraging its signifiers of resistance as evidence of unassailable black male grief. The closer Goines moved to nationalist politics and corresponding black masculine heroism the further he moves from their promises.

As Terrance Tucker argues, Goines' later works, which should be noted are published relatively close in time to initial works due to his tragically short career, display a decided shift to themes of black revolution. Specifically, Tucker rightfully points to Goines' most sustained literary achievement, the aforementioned "Kenyatta Series," as evidence of an emerging dedication to more politically explicit literature. The Kenyatta Series spans four novels—*Crime Partners*, *Death List*, *Kenyatta's Escape*, and *Kenyatta's Last Hit* (published posthumously)—written over the course of two years.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, these texts, although published in the waning years of BAM, are on the surface the most thematically aligned. Across nearly 700 pages in total, the series chronicles the radical insurgent efforts of black freedom fighter Kenyatta as he wages a bloody war on drug pushers and racist police forces across multiple states. Kenyatta is undoubtedly a different character than the likes of Prince, Whoreson, Earl the Pearl, and a plethora of Goines' other hustler figures. Revolution is not ruse for Kenyatta—it is his singular dedication. Kenyatta is described in action movie star-like stature and capabilities; commanding and handsome, repeated attention is given to his glistening bald head, almost supernatural ability to inspire, martial arts skills, and lovemaking aptitude. BAM intellectuals' silence around the series is most curious as Kenyatta, as Nationalist hero, is the most likely to have found appeal amongst BAM participants.

It is Kenyatta's status, in the words of Bryant, as "an outsized version of a Black Power nationalist," that situates his distinct political identity within the spectrum of Goines' ultimately fatalist vision of the experience of black men. For all of his and his dedicated followers revolutionary commitment and aptitude the pillars of white supremacy, the police state and drug economy remain unmatched in force. In other words, Kenyatta's strength can be read as evidence of his relative incapacity to combat white racism in its most explicit expressions of brutishness, i.e., violence. Again, scholars like Tucker and Stallings have been right to emphasize that Goines is unjustly tagged as *only* writing stories of pimps, pushers, and addicts. Indeed, his most

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<sup>120</sup> The one exception may be Goines rural vengeance fantasy *Swamp Man*, wherein, while not necessarily a triumphant story, the protagonist dies violently following the accomplishment of vengeful justice.

<sup>121</sup> To counter the publisher's fear that their star author might saturate his market, Goines published the series under a pseudonym, Al C. Clarke.

sustained storyline features a Black Nationalist revolutionary as protagonist.<sup>122</sup> The series can be read as shifting away from the nihilistic exploitation of Black Nationalism by the likes of *Black Gangster's Prince* as Kenyatta also begins by committing “crimes” to fund his revolutionary organization; unlike Prince’s hustle Kenyatta’s political ambition is earnest. While the shift this series of novels indicates is important, I read against conclusions that Goines was establishing a more optimistic and Nationalist vision of blackness in the interest of considering these novels as verification of Goines’ prevailing narrative motif of violent black male death. Specifically, it is the series conclusion that conjoins the Kenyatta epic to Goines’ established design of ultimate black male defeat.

In the final installment of the Kenyatta Series, *Kenyatta's Last Hit*, the unassailable hero zeros in on LA’s biggest supplier of narcotics, Clement Jenkins. Jenkins is a physically frail yet socially empowered kingpin whose commerce caused the massacres Kenyatta fought against drug pushers and corrupt police in Detroit and LA. Jenkins is the epitome of the era’s archetypal omnipotent “(the) man”; a singular figure that encapsulates the abstracted hegemony of white supremacy. Following the logic of frailty engendered by social and economic decadence Jenkins, as systemic racism in concentrate, is portrayed as physically ineffective when stripped to the corporeal. Described as “slim” and “smelling of death” Kenyatta notes that Jenkins looked as if “he never had lived.”<sup>123</sup> Jenkins’ lavish warren is juxtaposed against the decaying nature of his “feeble” body and highlights the corresponding relationship of white male material power and emasculated physicality. Kenyatta presumes the massive oak desk from which Jenkins works served as compensation that “gave him a sense of power.”<sup>124</sup> Indeed, always found in the office or on the balcony of his plush Las Vegas penthouse he stands behind the proverbial curtain pulling the administrative strings of black despair.

After more than a year of preparation Kenyatta, posing as well-established interested buyer, earns a meeting with Jenkins. In the manner he has always successfully used Kenyatta plans to overtake Jenkins through violence and bring down his cartel. Unfortunately, Jenkins is wary of Kenyatta as brash unknown buyer and stages a series of ambushes that leave Kenyatta’s well-trained and dutiful followers dead before they can convene with their leader who is meeting privately with the kingpin. When the violence spills into the penthouse and erupts into a shootout

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<sup>122</sup> Greg Thomas’s outstanding essay, “George Jackson-Ambushing-in *Swamp Man*: Detecting *Soledad Brother* and *Blood in My Eye* in Donald Goines” provides a less explicit possibility by arguing that Goines most anomalous novel, *Swamp Man*, draws upon the life and political theories of George Jackson and deftly engages the novel as testimony to Jackson as icon of insurgence. Specifically, Thomas reads for liberatory of potential of guerilla ambush in *Swamp Man*. Yet, unlike Kenyatta, Jackson is dedicated to personal vengeance with political connotation rather than the overt political organization and objective. Goines only book set in the American rural south *Swamp Man* is the story of young Mississippian George Jackson’s stealthy quest to avenge the torture and rape of his sister Henrietta by a gang of white men during her visit home from college. Thomas argues that while there is no explicit mention from Goines, he named his character for legendary Soledad Brother George Jackson; the assumption of coincidence is a “mockery” to Goines political awareness and disregards the novels consistent attention to Jackson’s espoused political philosophies, namely the potential of guerilla warfare tactic of ambush and violence a means of social justice.

<sup>123</sup> Donald Goines, *Kenyatta's Last Hit*, (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1975), 209.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 213.

Kenyatta's singular focus is Jenkins, who he shoots in the shoulder. The force of the bullet sends Jenkins tumbling behind the protective shelter of his desk. However, he does not pursue the wounded honcho but rather waits for him to emerge from his hiding place. It is not simply Jenkins' death and thus an end to his reign of drug distribution that Kenyatta is after. Kenyatta also desires the vindication of seeing a figure that had abstractly disempowered him, and all black people, in a state of desperate incapacity. Indeed, the risk involved in waiting suggests that that seeing Jenkins traumatized and pleading is the symbolic gratification that he desires most of all;

He wanted to see the white man crawl, the white millionaire who dealt in death. He wanted to see him crawling on his hands and knees, begging for some kind of mercy. Kenyatta would wait all night to see it, to see a man whom he had hated in the abstract for so many years beg him for his life.<sup>125</sup>

This passage appears to be the climax upon which the sprawling four-novel epic builds and promises vengeful satisfaction. Kenyatta's physical stature and righteous dedication towering over Jenkins' shameful opulence and infantile groveling is the perfect inversion of power from mechanized white male to gallant black man. Alas, this passage and its promises are followed by a paragraph break and the deflation of the following sentence, "But Kenyatta was not to see this." As Kenyatta stands idly yearning for Jenkins to slither from behind his "mammoth oak desk" a generic henchman shoots Kenyatta in the back of the head. His death is sudden and unceremonious. Stalked from the rear and unknowingly shot one needs to read the passage twice to be sure that in fact the hero has been killed. As Jackson puts it, "Kenyatta finally meets his end at the moment for which he has lived."<sup>126</sup> The cultivation of the larger than life Kenyatta is jarred by how quickly death brings him back on the equal footing of vulnerable corporeality. Kenyatta is not killed by "the man" but simply by *a* white man. The nonspecific identity of his murderer has the impact of reasserting the omnipresent nature of white supremacist violence. Kenyatta's attention is fixed on anticipatory vengeance upon the representational embodiment of anti-blackness. However, it is indeed the illusory assurance of this figure as comprehensive representative that costs him his life.

The final passage of the novel, and of course of the series, finds the biracial detective duo of Benson and Ryan, who had pursued Kenyatta from the first novel *Crime Partners*, standing over Kenyatta's body. In typical Goines fashion, Kenyatta's dead body is described in gruesome detail that further depletes his previous stature: "flies eating away at the black man's shattered skull. His brain matter had turned sickly green, and was still oozing from the wound."<sup>127</sup> It is in the barbarism of his death that the duo first *sees* Kenyatta after years of his eluding pursuit. The invisibility of black radical fugitivity is understood as criminal by the duo, and it is only in the harrowing first sight of Kenyatta's dead body that the merit of his political imperative is recognized. The detectives, according to the third-person narrator, share a veiled sorrow as they recognize that Kenyatta is not the villain (or perhaps even the criminal) nor is he the one who deserves this grisly death. "Deep inside, both men knew the wrong man was lying in the desert.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>126</sup> Candice Love Jackson, "The Paradox of Empowerment: *Kenyatta* Series", Community, and Criminology in Donald Goines," *Word Hustle*, 46.

<sup>127</sup> Goines, *Kenyatta' Last Hit*, 221.

But neither knew who the right man was.”<sup>128</sup> Indeed, *someone* deserves it; however, they do not know *who* does deserve it.

Goines’ poignant final sentence is premised on the limitations of full resistive recourse in the purview of hegemonic white supremacy. Black suffering, understood as mandate of white supremacy, is often and *can always be* legible on any pained or slain black body. Conversely, resistance to white supremacy cannot manifest *equally* on any single white body. White supremacy exists in such omnipotence and is so hegemonic in nature that there is indeed no single white body, including primary and representative culprits like Jenkins that could lie in Kenyatta’s place. Goines not only denies his reader Kenyatta’s victory over Jenkins, black masculinity over the whiteness of “the man,” he gestures to the limitedness of such representational victories. The foreclosure of triumphant resistance doubles as a thwarting of exultant black masculine heroism. However, the death of the black hero comes with a sprawling criminalization of white supremacy that slips the knot of individuated specification and thus the satisfaction of pointed physical resistance. Rather Kenyatta’s death suggests the limits of black revolutionary heroism while also gesturing to the foundational corruption of hegemonic white supremacy in place of corrupted representations, embodied in the likes of “the man,” i.e., Jenkins. Like Tucker, I do not read the conclusion as a concession to the impossibility of radicalism or as a moralistic condemnation of violence. However, nor is it an endorsement. Goines is not politically prescriptive but rather suggestive of the limits to masculinist heroism. Disavowed vengeance and the death of the masculine hero caution against the ephemeral emotional reparation of representational vengeance in favor of a broader, and alas more amorphous, critique of systemic white oppression. Goines does not grant any vision of perspective liberatory strategy or any *explicit* call to political consciousness comparable to the parlance of Baraka’s “S.O.S.” Instead the grief of the hero’s defeat, denial of vengeance, and ambivalence of justice, lingers in the absence of further narrative text. The end of the epic series sanctions the reader’s perspective to transition to grievance without announcing or endorsing it.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 221.

## Afterword

### Life After Death: Notorious BIG, The Last Poets and Making Manhood in the Shadow of the Black Arts

Donald Goines was ahead of his time. This is a tragic fact for a man who died struggling to make his living as a writer. He passed before the extent of his influence fully materialized and before he could receive a fair share of earnings for his work.<sup>1</sup> Like all legends, in death Goines has become larger than life. In this age of overwhelming access to information the quality of Goines' status is a vestige of a bygone era: he is a proper folkloric figure. His status is created at a cross-section of uncanny professional production and a blurry, even fugitive, biography—a mixture of veritable data and inflated hearsay. Goines authored a shelf-worth of novels (sixteen in total), which have remained in print for more than forty years. Yet, despite his prolific and lasting output, there is a dearth of biographical information. No video, no audio, no print interviews, scattered personal memoir and correspondence, the records of an exploitative employer and a murder case that was barely acknowledged by authorities, let alone solved. Kevin Young's words, "To praise the persona is to mourn the self who made it," are apropos.<sup>2</sup> For a man whose personal experience was so critical to the subject matter and marketing of his letters it is ironic that the facts of his life are dwarfed by the impact of his writings.

Appropriately, while Goines is at best a fringe character amongst literati, Black Arts Movement scholars included, he is regarded as literary forefather to genres that are also relatively marginalized by academia; most notably Hip-Hop and to a lesser extent Hip-Hop Studies. Greg Thomas correctly notes that emcee's write about reading Donald Goines "far more than any literary critic of the elite."<sup>3</sup> This is no small matter. For the past nearly forty years Hip-Hop has held the majority claim to, and authority to decree the terms of, black masculine authenticity in spaces of popular cultural discourse. This status has provoked debate over to what extent, or more often, at what cost, Hip-Hop extends and/or disrupts the aesthetic and political drives of its aesthetic and political predecessors. A legacy of African American cultural epochs narrates Hip-Hop as the complex inheritor of Black Arts/Black Power discursive terms of blackness, masculinity, and authenticity. In key aesthetic, sonic, and rhetorical ways this is quite accurate. Yet, the resonance of black noir and popular fiction offer a significant, and I would argue under-appreciated, lineage of culture expressions preoccupied with authentic black manhood. In the same vein, Goines is acknowledged and celebrated as a featured standard bearer of realist street narrative for those, almost always male, artists who make vivid account driven hip-hop. Extending Thomas's observation, direct reference to Goines in lyrical content

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<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 4 quantifying Goines' influence is a tricky endeavor. The ranging estimates of book sales reflect Holloway House's less than strict, or forthcoming, bookkeeping practices. Further, Goines' novels were often shared among readers suggesting a type of communal reading that slips the capitalist metric of book sales as paramount measurement of readership.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywold Press, 2015) 384.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Thomas, "16 Novels and a Microphone," *Word Hustle: Critical Essays on the Words of Donald Goines*, eds. Greg Thomas and, Lamonda Horton-Stallings (Baltimore: Imprint Editions, 2011), 203.

outweighs reference to any BAM writer. This distinction points to a meaningful shift in the terms of masculine authenticity and intraracial homosocial discourse following BAM.

The Notorious BIG is among the rappers most often associated with Goines. Their association is both aesthetic and biographic. Like Goines, Brooklyn born emcee Notorious BIG— aka Biggie or Biggie Smalls (born Christopher Wallace)—died a tragic violent death at a young age. Also, like Goines, no one has been held legally responsible for Biggie’s murder or the murder of his counterpart Tupac Shakur. The year 2016 marked the twentieth anniversary of Biggie’s passing. Naturally the anniversary of the profound loss inspired an outpouring of reflections by a generation of admirers. In one such tribute featured on the *Vevo* website, music journalist Timmohtep Aku wrote that, “He [BIG] chronicled capers like he was a Donald Goines for the Hip-Hop Generation.”<sup>4</sup> Of his lyricism Aku continues, in terms that could easily refer to Goines’ letters, “His were stories meant to both excite and affect. The morality may be gray, but mortality is certain.”<sup>5</sup> For Biggie grief was not solely a narrative motif of looming mortality but also a sonic tone of alluring survival. Kevin Young credits BIG’s preoccupation with lives lived always “ready to die” to a longer blues tradition in which sorrow is fundamental to the affective structure of form and performance. Young refutes a strand of Hip-Hop criticism that contests BIG as emblematic of a post-Civil-Rights-era nihilistic abandonment of hope and purpose.<sup>6</sup> He declares that BIG “returned the blues mood to hip-hop.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed. However, it is likely that BIG was as directly, if not necessarily more affectingly, influenced by the street narratives of Goines as by blues scales of the likes of Charlie Parker.

It must be noted of Aku’s comparison that in fact Donald Goines *was* “the Donald Goines” of urban capers for those who came of age in Hip-Hop’s first and second generation. To adapt the Hip-Hop colloquium, Goines was quite likely *your favorite rapper’s favorite writer*.<sup>8</sup> However, while in some ways BIG rhymed like Goines wrote he never actually rhymed *about* Goines. Though BIG’s contemporaries did. Rivals Tupac, Nas, Ghostface, and Raekwon and

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<sup>4</sup> <http://hq.vevo.com/thinking-big-grit-glamour-notorious-b-g/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Debates regarding rap’s relationship to nihilism regarding the quality of nihilism as a state of psychological corruption engendered by severe conditions or agentive tool of existential transcendence are beyond my scope here. In fact, I find this debate tired in its polarity and strict conclusions. As such I do not contend that Big raps from a more enlightened or deranged psychological state.

<sup>7</sup> Young, *Grey Album*, 384.

<sup>8</sup> Goines as a key literary figure is particularly notable in this context because the late 80’s and early 90’s are often noted to be the “golden age” of political Hip-Hop. As Charise Cheney has chronicled Hip-Hop “neo nationalist” or “raptavists” of the late ‘80s and early ‘90s was heavily influenced by Nationalists teaching of Afrocentricity, Black Panther Party and the NOI. Further, Cheney, George Nelson, Jeff Chang and others suggest that this “golden age” produced the most expressly political music in the culture’s still young history. Following these scholars’ understandable but somewhat restrictive definitions of “political” music Goines is most often referenced by those who would commonly be understood as non-political rappers. However, “political” or “conscious” rappers like Tupac, Nas, and Grand Puba are evidence that reference to Goines should not be understood as evidence of apoliticism or supposed false consciousness. Further, such labels beg for recalibrations of the meaning of politics and what one must speak about to be deemed political.

associates Jay-Z, The Lox, and Cam'ron, to name just a few, make lyrical references to Goines.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Nas named his 1996 track "Black Girl Lost" after Goines' sixth novel; that same year Tupac stated on the song "Tradin Wars," "Machiavelli was my tutor/Donald Goines, my father figure," while Kool G Rap, one of the key precursors of Biggie's signature narrative style and delivery deemed himself "The Donald Goines of Rap."<sup>10</sup> This is to say, while BIG never directly referenced the Detroit author it seems likely he would have been familiar with Goines. And, aware or not, he undoubtedly evokes the likes of Goines and Iceberg Slim in more instinctive ways than, say, Amiri Baraka or Larry Neal. Yet, BIG's career emerged not through acknowledging Goines as an influence but through a subtle but loaded disassociation from Black Art Movement bards, The Last Poets.

On BIG's first studio song, "Party and" the rapper made his impactful debut by updating, and indeed distorting, a refrain and cadence from a fading Black Power anthem, The Last Poets' 1968 song, "When the Revolution Comes." Formally established in Harlem in 1968, The Last Poets were pioneers of spoken word poetry and seminal antecedents of Hip-Hop. Alongside Gil Scott Heron, The Last Poets melded Black Arts literary tropes, Black Power rhetoric, and soul-funk sonicism and brought Black Arts/Black Power to the Top 40 charts. Their critical and commercial success indicated that not only was Black Power(ful) and beautiful but, in the words of Craig Watkins, blackness was "bound to sell."<sup>11</sup> Scott Heron and The Last Poets were keenly aware of creeping appropriations of Black Power in the early 1970s. Both Scott Heron and The Last Poets featured lyrics that spotlighted American materialism and vanity as national obsessions and prophesized that such decadence would bring national ruin. However, while Scott Heron famously proclaimed that, "the revolution will not be televised," The Last Poets were less sure.

On "When the Revolution Comes," co-founding member of The Last Poets Omar Bin Hassen can't shake the concern that, "some of us will probably catch it (the revolution) on TV." The line suggests that rebellion would likely precede a full Nationalist union. Hassen includes the non-revolutionary spectator in the racial collective of "us" but cites their passivity as evidence of intraracial dissimilarity. Hassen later goes on to lament that until, and perhaps even after, the revolution comes, "you know and I know niggers will party and bullshit and party and bullshit and party and bullshit and party and bullshit and party..." The lethargic melody of the repeated "party and bullshit" conveys hollow indulgences and a steady rhythm of unconsciousness maintained through social complacency. Hassen cuts off the condemning chant of "party and bullshit" and concludes with the despairing forecast that "...some might even die before the revolution comes." The cause of these pre-revolution deaths is left ambiguous. Yet it is fair to conclude that death is a consequence of ostensible self-destructive tendencies, or vulnerable circumstances, of the unenlightened non-revolutionary. The song, and the

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<sup>9</sup> For these references and others see Greg Thomas' "16 Novels on the Microphone: For 'Cultural Guerilla Resistance,' Now," and Tracy Grant "Why Hip-Hop Heads Love Donald Goines."

<sup>10</sup> See, Nas. "Black Girl Lost." *It Was Written*, Columbia, 1996, 2Pac. "Tradin Wars." *All Eyes on Me*, Death Row/ Interscope, 1996. Kool G. Rap quote can be found in the following interview, <http://www.urbansmarts.com/interviews/koolgrap.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Craig Watkins, "Black is Back, and It's Bound to Sell! Nationalist desire and the Production of Black Popular Culture," *Is It Nation Time: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, eds, Eddie S. Glaude (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002), 189-214.



implications of the refrain “party and bullshit” in particular, takes on a complicated and ultimately tragic prophecy twenty-three years after its original recording at the birth of Notorious B.I.G.’s recording career.

As noted during Hip-Hop’s “golden era” of political rap (roughly 1988-1994) the likes of Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Ice Cube consistently alluded to Black Power iconography to signal their socio-political ethos, contextualize contemporary social matters, and frame rap as transfiguration of previous modes of black cultural radicalism. Urgings to both intellectually and literally “Fight the Power(s)” of hegemonic white supremacy and warnings that black people were, by consequence of coerced condition, “Headed for Self-Destruction” extended Black Arts hallmarks of forthright insurgence and communal self-determination. Indeed, while content of the era is often dubbed “political,” the likes of Jeffrey Decker and Charise Cheney are right that the politics of the era were most commonly Nationalist. In this respect The Last Poets are not a surprising source of inspiration or reference in Hip-Hop.<sup>12</sup> Rather it is surprising that *Biggie* would draw on The Last Poets. While heralded as amongst the genre’s greatest lyricists by nearly any critical standard, Biggie is not regarded as a “political” or “conscious” rapper. In fact, he slips the circumscribed criteria of subgenre designation and, although not without some reason, is commonly relegated to the loaded terms of “gangster rapper” or ostentatious “platinum era” rapper. In turn he is cited as distinguishable or redeemed by the social acuity and shrewd humor of his lyrics, dexterity of his wordplay, and the haunting self-contemptuousness of his anti-heroes. Like Goines, B.I.G.’s strength was first person narrative stories and, like Goines, his primary narrative figures are almost uniformly masculine outlaws. Yet, as Orson Welles once described Macbeth, Big presents “a different kind of gangster because he’s a gangster with a conscience.”<sup>13</sup> Accordingly unlike the lionization of Black Power masculine figures in previous years by more politically minded emcees B.I.G.’s citation of the Last Poets provides a distinct, Goines-esque, critical recalibration of Black Power tenants of racial authenticity.

On “Party and Bullshit” B.I.G. closes his first verse with the declaration and directive, “all we wanna do is...” with a chorus of men responding with only slightly more eager tenor than the original, “party and bullshit, and party and bullshit...” Variations on this call and response function as the recurrent transition from verse to the hook throughout the song. Of course, the central deviation from the original song, along with aforementioned up-tempo melody, is that B.I.G. raps that all “*we wanna do is...party and bullshit*” (emphasis mine). Biggie’s alteration to the original lyrics and oratory pace are slight but significant. B.I.G. shifts the Last Poets’ accusatory claim that non-revolutionary, “niggers will party and bullshit,” into a possessive pronoun of collective intention, i.e. “all *we wanna do is party and bullshit*” (emphasis mine). B.I.G.’s refrain expresses an active desire toward celebration and idleness whereas the Last Poets’ original phrasing signaled an accusation of lack of investment. Through an act of intertextual signification B.I.G. takes ownership of a status maligned by The Last Poets.

B.I.G.’s lampoonist rebuke of BAM-era black masculine radicalism stands as the inaugural gesture in a career of assertions of “realness.” In this foundational example B.I.G. “keeps it real”

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<sup>12</sup> For examples of more expected unions of “conscious” Hip-Hop and the Last Poets in the “golden age” and beyond see, Tribe Called Quest “Excursions.” *Low End Theory*, Jive/RCA Records, 1991, Common, “The Corner.” *Be*, GOOD/ Geffen, 2005, and Nas, “Project Roach.” *Untitled*, Def Jam/Columbia Records, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Orson Welles, “Monologue from Macbeth,” *The Steve Allen Plymouth Show*, NBC, April 6, 1958.

by embracing a position of BAM denouement—that of a specific form of Nationalist social unconsciousness. BIG’s authority is grounded, in part, by a deliberate and specific aloofness not a politically directed social consciousness. Moreover, he does so via a shrewd rhetoric maneuver that marshals an explicit textual reference to BAM to signal implicit disassociation from one its core values. In other words, BIG’s assertion of authenticity is made through a usurpation of a charge of false consciousness. In the words of Jake Hamilton, for Biggie, “the opiate becomes the end itself.”<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, Biggie’s tilt in refrain and cadence denotes how fickle claims to racial and masculine authenticity are, and how quickly the firm ground of declaration can become referenced terrain of the passé. Indeed, despite the resolute tone used to stake a claim to authenticity one can easily find themselves displaced into the space of failed or inauthentic. The Last Poets critiqued BIG’s song for upending the revolutionary call of the original by celebrating and encouraging excess and idleness. Group member Abiodun Oyewole notes, “When I wrote [about] ‘party and bullshit’ it was to make people get off their ass. But now ‘party and bullshit’ was used by Biggie, used by Busta Rhymes, but not in a conscious way.”<sup>15</sup> Granting the colloquial meaning of “conscious,” this is a fair reading coming from Hassen and Oyewole, who were the core of the group and are certainly in a position to issue it. Many either agree or have come to comparable conclusion; for instance, *Spin* magazine author Sia Michael stated the song was evidence that BIG was a “child of a revolution that never came.”<sup>16</sup> This may not have been a point lost on BIG as such critics suggest. BIG’s desire to, “party and bullshit,” implies and may obliquely acknowledge that The Last Poets’ revolution never arrived.

A little over a year after the release of “Party and Bullshit,” Big released his freshman album, *Ready To Die*. The album’s second track, “Things Done Changed” is a fitting follow up considering his 1993 single “Party and Bullshit” in relation to BAM. “Things Done Changed” is vintage Biggie; drifting between lament, ambivalence, and acceptance he details the material and psychological landscape of displaced young men; specifically the brevity of adolescence and the pulls of criminality. The song does not deny the presence of morality in the lives of those described; rather, it questions the weight of its authority against the pressures of self-preservation. BIG contextualizes the current condition against an ambiguous “back in the day” which calls to his youth as well as to an even more utopic sort of “time before.” In this respect, with more than a tinge of irreverence BIG warns the generation from “back in the day” to be wary as *their* old rules no longer apply. Yet somewhere in Biggie’s unwavering claim that “things done changed” is Baraka’s echo whispering of a “changing same.” In BIG’s declaration, like the words of so many BAM’s stalwarts, one hears a voice whose assurance and anxiety share a thin boundary that is in part steadied by an external disavowal. Indeed, BIG is quite right: things had changed, as they will continue to do, yet the more many things change the more it seems something’s remain the same.

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<sup>14</sup> Jake Hamilton, “The Beatles. Bob Dylan. Biggie Smalls. Why the rapper belongs in the company of pop’s most influential artists,” *Slate*, September 11, 2014. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/09/ready\\_to\\_die\\_twenty\\_years\\_after\\_the\\_not\\_orious\\_b\\_i\\_g\\_s\\_debut\\_we\\_re\\_still.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/09/ready_to_die_twenty_years_after_the_not_orious_b_i_g_s_debut_we_re_still.html)

<sup>15</sup> Oyewole, Abiodun. Interview by SameOldShawn, “Outside the Lines with Rap Genius,” October 9, 2012. <https://genius.com/posts/1449-New-podcast-abiodun-oyewole-of-the-last-poets>

<sup>16</sup> Sia Michael, “Last Exit in Brooklyn: The Notorious B.I.G.” *Spin*, May 1, 1997. <http://www.spin.com/1997/05/last-exit-brooklyn-notorious-big/>

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