James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination

Brim, Matt

Published by University of Michigan Press

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/36853.

➢ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/36853

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1434831
CHAPTER I

James Baldwin’s Queer Utility
Black Gay Male Literary Tradition
and Go Tell It on the Mountain

Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one’s nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one’s nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one’s robes.

—James Baldwin, The Devil Finds Work

“We don’t have many names for our radical dependence on the past, how it facilitates even our sharpest breaks with it.”

—Christopher Nealon, “Queer Tradition”

Once our traditions have been sullied, once they carry the taint of an all-too-modern homosexual funkiness, it becomes that much more apparent that we are continually in a process of choosing whether and how to continue those traditions.

—Robert Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Desire, Choice, and Black Masculinity in Post-War America

In the introduction, I prefaced the ways that James Baldwin has been alternately and distinctly situated within an African American literary canon and a gay literary canon. That “apparent” incommensurability has been created by strange bedfellows. In his 1991 discussion of the homophobic reception of Baldwin’s fiction, Emmanuel Nelson argues, “Critically engaging Baldwin’s fiction proves to be too much of a challenge for many white heterosexual critics, although there are notable exceptions. . . . But to many the task of examining the perspective of a novelist who is both Black and gay is too taxing on their imaginative resources. . . . Their reactions range from mild dis-
comfort to shock, angry dismissal and hysteria, and studied silence.”¹ Nelson thoroughly documents the racialized homophobia present in white reviewers’ assessments of Baldwin’s fiction. White straight reviewers “seem generally comfortable with Baldwin’s non-fiction prose [which rarely mentions the subject of homosexuality] but are often uncomfortable with his fiction [in which homosexuality is often present].”² In other words, critics’ negative homophobic reviews (including no review at all) effectively popularize and privilege Baldwin as an exclusively black mouthpiece. This occurs precisely to the extent that anti-racist, anti-homophobic “imaginative resources” fail them. Robert Reid-Pharr suggests another reason why homosexuality in Baldwin’s fiction (and life) has gone un-reviewed by literary critics when compared to race, though he approaches the matter from the other direction. Gently parroting the critics, Reid-Pharr writes, “One must remember always that Baldwin is the black author, the paragon of the Black American intellect, the nation’s prophet of racial tolerance, one whose queer sexuality presumably stands in such anomalous relation to his racial presence, intellectual and otherwise, that it works only as the exception proving the rule.”³ The complex rationale at play here, according to Reid-Pharr, is that Baldwin’s positioning as “the” black writer not only results from the critics’ failure to pursue homosexual themes but also rests on their unwillingness to interrogate, as Baldwin would have them do, whiteness in relation to blackness. In this scenario, both whiteness and homosexuality become intangible through the insistence on Baldwin’s black authorial presence.

While these twin, white critical disavowals, the first of Baldwin’s homosexuality and the second of Baldwin’s insights into the construction of whiteness, have perhaps resulted in the author’s racialization as black, disavowals have also come from quarters of black literary and cultural criticism. I want to acknowledge that, like the white straight critics whom Nelson takes to task, black critics have sometimes exhibited the same homophobic reactions to Baldwin, “from mild discomfort to shock, angry dismissal and hysteria, and studied silence.” But I want to turn to Sharon Patricia Holland’s important analysis of African American literary tradition and its relationship to black gay writing to deepen the conversation about black critics’ appropriation of black gay writers as (primarily or exclusively) black writers. In the fourth chapter of her book Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity, Holland explicitly seeks to “foste[r] a procreative black imaginative terrain”⁴ that does not excise black gay subjectivity, including that found in her primary textual example, Randall Kenan’s novel A Visitation of Spirits.
Holland argues that one primary obstacle standing in the way of the reclamation of the novel’s black gay presence is the African American social and literary critic’s strong desire to solidify a black literary tradition. Just as such a tradition has been subverted by racist constructions of an “American” (read “white”) national literature, African American critics’ need for a tradition of “their own” quite often returns us to “territories where power is utilized in its most ‘traditional’ form.” In both cases, homophobic exclusion becomes a tradition-defining strategy. But further, part of the difficulty in trying to situate black gay literature within a black literary tradition extends from the fact that “the word \textit{tradition}, in the African American sense, encompasses all that is surely black and procreative.”

Black critics, privileging family narratives within the text and deploying genealogical tropes to set texts in relation to each other, thus reassert a traditional power structure by relying on a heterosexualized hermeneutics. Linking the need for an African American literary tradition to the larger field of play in which “tradition” reinscribes normative relations, Holland concludes that “the gay, lesbian, or bisexual (sub)text of critical and literary endeavors, and therefore the African American canon, is somehow treated as secondary to developing a literary project emphasizing its procreative aspects. The relegation of queer subjects to the unproductive end of black literary production places them in a liminal space. Such disinheritance from the procreative process contradicts a communal desire to bring back (all) black subjects from the dead, from the place of silence.”

While my extended treatment of the vexed relationship between race and procreation appears in chapter 4 of this book, I want to mark here the important links Holland makes between retrieving an African American literary genealogy and reclaiming procreative rights denied to African Americans under the many-layered system of American racism. Yet finding “no precedent” either in black literature or the lesbian and gay canon for Kenan’s story of a black gay Southern youth’s suicide and ghostly return, Holland looks to Baldwin’s \textit{Giovanni’s Room}, where “the tradition unfolded itself in a queer configuration of black and white.”

Despite the problems she identifies with “tradition,” Holland resists jettisoning that critical framework, a decision that has several implications. Her reading attempts to signify off of the unwelcoming metaphors of heterosexual procreation in order to “embrace Kenan’s novel as hopeful progeny in a long line of sons and daughters.” Not only can we question the success of the resignification of familial metaphors in this context, but we can also consider the genealogical irony involved. The queer “progeny” exemplified by
A Visitation of Spirits joins the “long line of sons and daughters” not through birth but through death, a highly suspect insinuation of queer blackness into familial history that seems more a rupture of that line than an integration into it. Standing against the hopefulness of Holland’s formulation is her final realization that inclusion within the broader African American literary tradition requires of Kenan “the ultimate erasing of black subjectivity in order to actualize a queer project,”10 for his black gay protagonist must resort to suicide in hopes that speaking from the dead will “force a community to see what it has left behind.”11 Perhaps despite her critical motivations, then, Holland raises the possibility that black gay literature cannot be incorporated into the field of African American literature as long as the latter is framed as a “tradition.” Assimilation into that “tradition” may require that black gay presence be made visible only through a concomitant rendering as invisible—in Kenan’s case, a ghosting that results in the absent presence of his black gay protagonist. Against this absence, Holland reads Baldwin as making Kenan’s narrative more present.

Holland’s work offers a compelling example of a scholar’s deep investment in reimagining her field of study—“the African American literary tradition, to which,” she writes, “I had directed my life’s work for the last ten years”12—to include queer perspectives. My initial point, which may at first seem innocuous, is that Holland, like so many other readers, turns to Baldwin to facilitate that reconciliation. He functions as foundational to the architecture of two now mutually buttressing edifices, being both the conduit for reading black gay male writers into the larger African American literary tradition and, simultaneously, the cornerstone of the black gay literary tradition itself. The excellence of his writing and its unparalleled critical and popular success provide the internal logic that justifies and enables that positioning. A black tradition cannot ignore him, and a black gay tradition cannot exist without him.

In fact, neither of the preceding statements is indisputable. But Baldwin makes it seem as though they are. More precisely, Baldwin’s critical positioning is now such that these statements have become, effectively, obvious. For this reason, Baldwin’s work has achieved a broad and even pervasive critical utility for scholars, like Holland and myself, who work at the theoretical intersection of black queer studies. In this chapter, I will analyze the status Baldwin has achieved in black queer studies, not by questioning the sometimes problematic ways his work has been used to integrate black gay
writing into the African American tradition but by interrogating the other, perhaps more obvious, use that has been made of him as the father figure of the black gay male literary tradition. As I have already suggested, even an essay such as Holland’s that explicitly attends to the dangers of constructing literary traditions risks naturalizing Baldwin as the core of black gay writing. Rather than an isolated instance, this case can be made more generally: as black queer studies has variously identified the intersections, overlaps, and dependencies of black literary canons and gay literary canons, it has, as a consequence, also (re)constructed a black gay male literary tradition. Within that tradition, one pattern is unmistakable: critics and creative writers alike have conceptualized the work of black gay male writers by thinking, as though inevitably, through Baldwin. Yet, as Holland implicitly argues, we must question the power plays by which all traditions are constructed. If Baldwin has been made to anchor or organize a black gay male literary tradition, in what ways, perhaps unavoidably, has “power [been] utilized in its most traditional form” in the creation of that tradition? Might we need to rethink how certain queer constructions paradoxically follow traditional ideologies? What might a black queer literary tradition look like, and what is Baldwin’s place in it? In this chapter, I complicate Baldwin’s pivotal position within black gay male writing by arguing that he operates, on the one hand, as the necessary central figure in the field and, on the other hand, as an unstable signifier of an always-rupturing tradition.

A NECESSARY REFERENCE

If it is nearly impossible to think of a black gay male literary tradition without thinking of and through James Baldwin, it is nevertheless quite possible to know the work of James Baldwin well—including his fiction, plays, essays, and his many interviews—without having almost any sense of the broader tradition that he has been made to anchor. In light of this asymmetry, I want first to reflect in some detail various moments in which Baldwin has been situated at the center of black gay male literature by other writers in that tradition, paying special attention to the metaphors used to conceptualize his centrality. An important volume of black gay male writing published in the spring of 1988, Other Countries: Black Gay Voices, contains the following dedication:
Welcome to a birth. In your hands is the latest addition to the small but growing canon of Black Gay Male literature, the new manchild in a family whose dead and living forefathers, brothers and cousins include B, BGM, Black and Queer (by Adrian Sanford), Blackbird and Eight Days a Week (by Larry Duplechan), Blackheart, Blacklight, Black/Out, Brothers, Change of Territory (by Melvin Dixon), Conditions and Earth Life (by Essex Hemphill), Diplomat, Habari-Daftari, In the Life, Moja: Black and Gay, Rafiki, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (by Richard Bruce Nugent), Tongues Untied, Yemonja, and the many works of James Baldwin and Samuel Delany.

Performing the task of “birthing” a “new manchild” into the “family” of “forefathers,” “brothers,” and “cousins,” the introduction ends by further metaphorizing Other Countries, describing it as “a vision” and “a difficult journey into new territory,” as well as an “excavation of a past that has been lost, hidden, stolen.” Building on this new/old framework, Robinson returns, in the end, to more familial metaphors to characterize the publication: “It is a [sic] homage to our forebears—like Richard Bruce Nugent and James Baldwin,” “a pride in our immediate parentage in Blackheart,” and a “legacy to go beyond [this] country.”

In the lineage described by Robinson, Baldwin stands shoulder to shoulder with several other “forefathers,” Richard Bruce Nugent and Bayard Rustin most notably, as the dedication in Other Countries makes clear. Nevertheless, Baldwin is more often represented as occupying a unique position, even in such intimate and elevated company. Nelson, writing in a legitimized, encyclopedic context, can thus repeat what has become a critical commonplace, that “[a]lthough [Baldwin] occupies an important place in African-American as well as gay American literatures, the significance of his life and work in the specific context of the black gay male literary tradi-
tion is immeasurable. He continues to be its defining figure.15 But even in the much more personal and idiosyncratic context of a blog, accomplished black gay experimental writer John Keene commits to the same basic argument, that although Baldwin is “the source of an ongoing ‘agon’” for certain writers, “every Black gay male writer writes under the star (in all senses of that word) of Baldwin (and Hughes, and Nugent, and Cullen, etc.).” This interesting parenthetical both broadens the “stars” in the black gay literary firmament beyond Baldwin and suggests that perhaps Baldwin’s star shines with a special light, illuminating the past, present, and future like no other black gay writer. Though he is “aware of [Baldwin’s] literary failings and his personal imperfections,” Keene maintains, “[F]or me, as for so many writers, [Baldwin remains] a towering and essential figure. He was, I should add, the spark that lit the fire that became the Dark Room Writers Collective, among other things, though his influence was also central to Other Countries and related [black queer] writing groups of the 1980s.”16

A synthesis of the two preceding paragraphs reveals a powerful composite picture of Baldwin: the “defining,” “towering,” “essential” “forefather” standing at the center, chronologically as well as figuratively, of the black gay male literary tradition in the United States. He has been made the fulcrum on which the plank of the black gay male literary tradition has tipped, located as he is in the middle of the last century, halfway between the ambiguously queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the productivity, much of it cut short by AIDS, of the gay eighties and nineties. No one casts a longer shadow; no one ignites a brighter spark. Again, I will question (even as I employ and test) the familial/genealogical renderings on which Other Countries relies and the notion of the author’s primacy that Keene posits. It is clear, though, that such constructions have been not only extremely prevalent but, more important, terribly useful. Indeed Baldwin, I will argue, has a protean and multifaceted “queer utility,” a usefulness for a complex variety of reading audiences. I want to inquire into that queer utility by, first, analyzing an extended example of Baldwin’s usefulness to two writers in particular, Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam. I choose these men for several reasons. Both have been inestimably important to black gay literature as writers themselves and as readers and editors of writing by other gay men of color. Hemphill particularly stands out, in much the same way as Baldwin, for the often devastating power of his social vision and the beauty of his writing. Thomas Glave’s invocation of Hemphill’s ever-presence, captured in the term “(re)recalling” that weds memory to “always, now,” suggests that
Hemphill’s death from AIDS marked a rupture into a “giantless time.” I argue, however, that both Hemphill and Beam looked to Baldwin in ways that ultimately make his “giant” presence in the black gay writing tradition at once unquestionable and problematic. I therefore frame Hemphill and Beam as exemplary figures of the watershed moment of black gay male writing in the 1980s and early 1990s that secured yet another heritage for Baldwin to disavow.

In his introduction to the 1991 collection *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men,* Essex Hemphill recalls his search for “the evidence of being” as a lonely and sometimes disabling attempt to uncover writing by and about black gay men.

My search for evidence of things not seen, evidence of black gay experiences on record, evidence of “being” to contradict the pervasive invisibility of black gay men, at times proved futile. I was often frustrated by codes of secrecy, obstructed by pretenses of discretion, or led astray by constructions of silence, constructions fabricated of illusions and perhaps cowardice. But I persevered. I continued to seek affirmation, reflection, and identity. I continued seeking the necessary historical reference for my desires.

“As I approached the mid-1980s,” recounts Hemphill, “I began to wonder if gay men of African descent existed in literature at all, beyond the works of Baldwin and Bruce Nugent, or the closeted works of writers of the Harlem Renaissance.” He then continues by singling Baldwin out for special mention, noting that Baldwin created some of the most significant works to be presented by an “acknowledged” black gay man in this century. “In the specific context of black gay literature, Baldwin’s special legacy serves as role model, as source of inspiration pointing toward the possibility of being and excellence. The legacy he leaves us to draw from is a precious gift for us to hold tight as we persevere.”

For Hemphill (and undoubtedly for countless others), Baldwin symbolizes the very possibility of being a black gay male writer, in that his visibility enables Hemphill’s own self-awareness; Hemphill sees himself thanks to the evidence Baldwin has left behind. In characterizing as “necessary” the
visible reference that might reflect his raced homoerotic desire, Hemphill suggests that his own artistic identity somehow depends on a literary forerunner such as Baldwin, whose “precious gift,” in Hemphill’s astute estimation, is his legacy as a black gay male “role model” for the younger writer. Even Hemphill’s narrative style in his appropriation and redeployment of Baldwin’s phrase “the evidence of things not seen” evinces Baldwin as the referent for the act of making black gay male experience legible. The idea at work here is that we are enabled or even created by our desiring forebears (or contemporaries) and the traces they leave behind.

Joseph Beam, whose groundbreaking 1986 anthology, In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology, was the first collection to make the visibility of black gay men its primary focus, raises the same issue of self-representation in the introduction to that volume, demonstrating the centrality of the theme of living in and as a shadow. Myriam Chancy notes that for Beam the artist, “the painful absence of representation in popular culture of Black gay life” proved especially disabling. “As a writer himself, Beam [sought] . . . Black gay authors whom to emulate,” while refusing “to read those white gay writers who have rendered him invisible within the pages of their texts.” Yet Beam laments, “How many times could I read Baldwin’s Just Above My Head?” What Hemphill and Beam sought was a lineage, literary and historical, raced and queer.

The black queer gaze that retrospectively seeks out and finds a forebear in Baldwin simultaneously projects itself into the future to form an ongoing lineage of black gay male writers. That forward-looking dynamic is often framed in the language of familial obligation. “If there is to be evidence of our experiences,” concludes Hemphill, “we learned by the close of the 1980s that our own self-sufficiency must ensure it, so that future generations of black gay men will have references for their desires.” Beam also addresses the generational discontinuity black gay men have faced, namely, “making ourselves from scratch.” Beam narrates his experience of looking at “a world not created in my image” yet having to do that world’s bidding, only to be faced at day’s end with the task of “rush[ing] home to do my own: creating myself from scratch as a black gay man.” Like Hemphill, Beam writes with an eye toward the future so that others will be able to look to the past with a sense of familiarity.

What is it that we are passing along to our cousin from North Carolina, the boy down the block, our nephew who is a year old, or our sons who
may follow us in this life? What is it that we leave them beyond this shadow-play: the search for a candlelit romance in a poorly lit bar, the rhythm and the beat, the furtive sex in the back street? What is it that we pass along to them or do they, too, need to start from scratch? 26

Both writers link themselves to Baldwin by constructing a larger, still-materializing tradition; they vow to “carry the word.” 27

I want to take seriously the need so eloquently recorded by Hemphill, Beam, and other black gay writers of the late twentieth century. To do so, I believe we must follow those writers in their understanding of the feminist truth that “the personal is the political.” 28 In their difficult searches that eventually led them to reconstruct a black gay literary inheritance around the work and person of Baldwin, many black gay men responded in deeply personal yet strikingly similar ways to the dramatic political punishments of social homophobia and, often, familial dispossession, both of which were also shaped by dominant cultural racism. Likewise, in their “reclaiming” of a tradition, they responded to an increasingly cohesive cultural context that, combined with their resolutely avowed needs, allowed for the articulation of a black gay male subjectivity and, therefore, literary genealogy. “Reclaiming” tradition, in other words, belies complicated acts of invention, acts of queer (because complicated) utility. Steven G. Fullwood, writer, archivist for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and founder of the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, suggests that writers of Hemphill’s era had to “claim gay” explicitly as part of a politics of presence initiated by black lesbians such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Cheryl Clarke. That politics, encapsulated in Clarke’s call to “[w]rite for our lives,” allowed for certain trajectories and traditions to be articulated. Those traditions, however, would be very different from any legacy available to Baldwin, who “had to say ‘gay’ to get past it” and who, as I will discuss in this book’s conclusion, often stands at odds with black and lesbian feminist thought. Many black gay male writers of the 1980s, however, returned to black lesbian feminism, especially as it helped to articulate the possibilities for black queer collectivity. Thus “the definition of, and necessity of, ‘tradition’ changes,” according to Fullwood, “as does the necessity of black queer presence.” 29

Writing for one’s black gay life in the 1980s and after inevitably meant something new. It meant writing in a cultural context infused with feminist thought but also radicalized by sociopolitical conservatism, its renewed racism, and its primary weapon of homophobia, AIDS. For black gay men to remain invis-
ible under these “liberated” conditions, conditions that had failed to liber-
ate, would have required new and unacceptable forms of self-deception. It
would have required hiding from the fact that one was being killed as a black
queer—homophobia, racism, and sexism having sharpened themselves
anew on each other in that decade. The response of many black queers to the
overtly threatening culture that explicitly sought their erasure was to claim
identity in their work. For many black gay men in particular, “tradition”— far
from a quaint notion—became a lifeline.

Discussing Baldwin’s “black” first novel and his “homosexual” second
novel, Marlon Ross joins Fullwood in attributing Baldwin’s stature as black
gay male role model to the broader cultural conditions in which Hemphill
and Beam sought him out as much as to the personal needs of individual
black artists bereft of a queer heritage. Ross writes, “Only with the emer-
gence of a more autonomous gay black sociopolitical consciousness in the
early 1980s did a public discourse arise that began to integrate Baldwin’s gay’
novel into an African American context. It is as if only an openly gay black
readership could give a valid racial identity to a novel otherwise cut off from
black experience, and it is no surprise that Baldwin’s work as a whole has
been a major cultural resource for people who identify as black and gay.”30
In Ross’s formulation, Baldwin becomes a “valid” black gay writer retroactively,
onece the kind of readership exists that can make that demand of him. If
Baldwin was a forefather to the many writers of the 1980s (and after) who
looked to him as such, it is also true, and not contradictory, to say that their
“looking to” Baldwin echoes with a procreative, forefather-making energy.

That potentially queer construction of black gay male literary genealogy
goes largely unexplored, however, overdetermined as Baldwin’s queer utility
has been by the conceptual limitations of “tradition.” Recognizing the nor-
malizing power that attends the uses to which Baldwin is so often put, Ross
immediately argues, “Nonetheless, the easy categorization of [Go Tell It on
the Mountain and Giovanni’s Room] projects onto them the very denials that
Baldwin was attempting to bring to the surface, and the potential ghettoiza-
tion of Baldwin as an author ‘for’ black gay people also contains assumptions
against which his work struggles.”31 In another context, Dwight McBride
specifically notes Hemphill’s reliance on claims to identity when he writes,
“[Hemphill] demonstrates his access to the various categories of [black gay
male] identity he claims, [but he] does not critique . . . the idea of the catego-
ries themselves. . . . [as he] plays the ‘race/sexuality’ card.”32 In this, Hemphill
appears at least partially to employ the “guard and keep” strategy of identity
that Baldwin saw as widespread and relatively unquestioned: “Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be.” Hemphill sees Baldwin standing at the nexus of “black gay man” precisely because he adopts the idea of a black gay male role model that Baldwin, to the contrary, refused to be. Implicit in the argument for generational continuity among black gay men is a reliance on the notion of a recognizable, if sometimes undiscovered, identity.

In their difficult search for self, Hemphill and Beam take hope thanks to the evidence left behind by Baldwin, and in doing so they run oddly parallel to another “traditional” use to which Baldwin has been put. For Hemphill, Baldwin exemplifies black gay male being and excellence; in much the same way, for reviewers and scholars, he has exemplified black being and excellence or, more frequently, “the voice of black experience,” supposedly demonstrated par excellence by the author’s first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain. D. Quentin Miller notes that three of Baldwin’s works consistently appear in anthologies and on college syllabi: the 1953 novel Go Tell It on the Mountain, the 1955 essay collection Notes of a Native Son, and the 1957 short story “Sonny’s Blues.” Chosen, surely, not only for their quality but, as their common themes and overarching concerns suggest, for their excellence as expressions of African American experience and “black consciousness,” these works have established Baldwin as an essential American writer by virtue of their verisimilitude, their “sense of reality and vitality” in representing blackness (and pointedly not black gayness). Go Tell It on the Mountain has been held up as Baldwin’s most powerful expression of the “black experience” and advertised as proof that he truly “knows Harlem, his people, and the language they use.” The claims to authenticity forwarded by Hemphill as well as most reviewers thus reveal another similarity: they each know what they are looking for in their subjects. In fact, they each see what they hope to find—a black gay role model and a “Negro” spokesman, respectively. Paradoxically, Baldwin, so galvanizing a figure for various audiences, undermined the possibility that he or his work should become representative. Nevertheless, the authority that accrues with semi-autobiographical writing such as Baldwin’s can threaten to overshadow its exploratory nature, as when, for example, Go Tell It on the Mountain is (still) made to signify as a “black experience” novel or even a black proto-gay novel rather than the mode of inquiry that
it truly was for Baldwin. Though he knew that in “clarify[ing] something” for himself in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* he would inevitably connect his experiences to that of others, it was nevertheless true that “[t]hroughout his career . . . [Baldwin] took pains to remind friends and interviewers that he was Jimmy Baldwin rather than the representative of some group.”

I have been arguing that the genealogy imagined by Hemphill—a connection among black gay male writers made amid the strains of cultural presence and absence—becomes problematic not only because it remakes Baldwin in Hemphill’s own much-needed image without interrogating the “truth” of the identity categories that undergird that image but, more important, because that re-creation is so clearly useful to the younger writer and cannot be dismissed even in the wake of the large-scale critique of identity offered by poststructuralist scholars. Steven Seidman reflects this difficult negotiation in *Difference Troubles*, his study of how difference might be more productively conceptualized in social theory and sexual politics than it is at present. The key standoff Seidman explores is between identity politics, which serves a self-enabling but also normalizing function in society, and a poststructuralist “non-identity,” which disrupts the illusory unity of identity at the risk of remaining an empty political or critical gesture. Yet even while he joins poststructuralist queer thinkers such as Judith Butler in their critique of identity, Seidman refuses to dismiss outright appeals to those stabilizing structures, arguing that “[i]dentity constructions are not disciplining and regulatory only in a self-limiting and oppressive way; they are also personally, socially, and politically enabling; it is this moment that is captured by identity political standpoints that seems untheorized in the poststructural critique.” Ultimately Seidman asks, “Queer theory . . . to what end?”—thereby gesturing toward a heretofore unarticulated queer intellectual ethic that might respond to lived experience as part of crafting a usable theory.

That impulse guides my thinking about the ways Hemphill and others remake Baldwin in their own image, for that image was necessary and essential for a generation who saw the futility of making itself from scratch and who, in response, bravely found the individual and collective voices to do otherwise. Yet that necessity cannot be the final word. Is there a way, I want to ask, that Baldwin can be a historical reference for Hemphill’s desire without having to be identified as a black gay role model? How might we otherwise reformulate the relationship between a self-identified black gay man and his forerunner who disavowed that identity?
That Baldwin has become uniquely necessary as a reference who makes other artists’ own raced homoerotic desires imaginable speaks to what I call his powerful “queer utility,” his not only enduring and enabling but also problematic presence in the work of queer imagination. To explore Baldwin’s paradoxical status, I will integrate a discussion of his queer literary genealogy with a pointed analysis of his debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the author’s most famous novelistic treatment of the themes of tradition and inheritance. I read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as a text that helps to negotiate the impasse of Baldwin’s place in the black gay literary tradition, an impasse that has been largely overlooked even though Baldwin eschewed his “tradition-al” voices—the black representative heralded by largely white liberal audiences and the black gay role model so necessary to writers of the 1980s—in favor of the voice of a “witness” who refuses to assume either of those identities. In fact, Baldwin’s most celebrated “black book” lends itself to queer interpretive strategies such that the authority that issues from the “black experience” is called into question. More to the point of this chapter, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* can become an instrument for similarly rethinking Baldwin’s place in black gay male literature.

Elsewhere in *Brother to Brother*, in an essay that is equally tribute, literary genealogy, and reverent critique, Beam acknowledges Baldwin’s indispensable yet sometimes vexing queer presence. While honoring the writer, Beam also registers his desire that Baldwin would have been more attuned to the lesbian feminist analyses by contemporaries such as Audre Lorde and thereby would have become more feminist himself. Beam’s title, “James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy, Brother,” thus signifies with the multiple meanings that define Baldwin’s queer utility. The title’s primary effect is that of understatement, a choice that throws into queer relief Baldwin’s unquestioned “excellence.” Yet the title can function as understatement only because of the very security of Baldwin’s legacy, and the brotherly form of address resonates with the intimate recognition of just how important Baldwin’s legacy has been. Gently, then, Beam begins the work of re-evaluating the lineage that connects him to Baldwin.

Quincy Troupe’s collection of remembrances, *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, would at first seem straightforwardly to verify that Baldwin has indeed left a legacy. The book contains many detailed personal reflections on Baldwin
and his capacity to touch others, revealing anew, through the idiosyncratic voices of its contributors, his ability to alter the very field of the imaginable, especially in terms of race relations. Several selections are by gay men, both black and white. A beautiful and, I think, telling memory by Caryl Phillips raises questions about how Baldwin’s sexuality contributed to his solitude. More explicit is a 1984 interview by Richard Goldstein (reprinted from the Village Voice) in which Baldwin at least partially addresses those questions of queer isolation. In doing so, however, he deeply problematizes his status as black gay male forebear and complicates the uses to which he has so necessarily been put by those seeking a literary, cultural, and personal inheritance.

For example, asked by Goldstein about being gay, Baldwin characteristically disavows the identity: “The word ‘gay’ has always rubbed me the wrong 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 in it.” Baldwin here replays his long-managed distancing (and even dissociation) from gay terminology, or what he called “labels.” In an interview twenty years earlier, for instance, he claimed that “those terms, homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual are 20th-century terms which, for me, really have very little meaning. I’ve never, myself, in watching myself and watching other people, watching life, been able to discern exactly where the barriers were. Life being what life is, passion being what passion is.” What strikes one in both of these interviews is that Baldwin seems to exist out of time, somehow beyond the reach of the terms that in fact lent powerful meaning to twentieth-century American life. He undermines the meaningfulness of sexual terminology and thereby exempts himself from meaningful association with such terms by focusing on the ambiguity of the “barriers” or boundaries that fail, in his estimation, to hold up to scrutiny. Tellingly, Baldwin avoids confronting the potentially more stable meanings that exist nearer the “center” of sexual identities. Instead, he makes borderlessness representative of or central to identity rather than an idiosyncratic complication of the ways identities, at their edges, can extend into each other and blur. Baldwin explains his inability to identify with sexual labels by framing the matter of sexuality as “very personal, absolutely personal.” Asked by Goldstein about “gay life, which is so group-oriented, so tribal,” he replies, “And I am not that kind of person at all. . . . I feel remote from it. . . . You see, I am not a member of anything.” At the same time, he attests to feeling
“very strongly for my brothers and sisters” and having a special responsibility “[t]oward the phenomenon we call gay . . . because I [knew that I] would have to be a kind of witness to it.” Baldwin’s compromise, which allowed him to uphold this responsibility without being beholden to the terms of the debate and which also allowed him once more to strategically position himself and his reputation beyond the politicization of homosexuality, was to make a “public announcement that we’re private.”

The genealogical act of imagination performed by Hemphill might profitably account for Baldwin’s own reticence to identify as gay and thereby marry the kinds of personal and public acts of meaning making that would allow him to figure prominently and unproblematically within a broader tradition of black gay male writing. Where Hemphill finds Baldwin—in relation to black gay creative community—Baldwin will not be found or fixed, as he writes neither from nor explicitly for that community. Yet crucially, we cannot simply dismiss the power of the uses to which Hemphill puts Baldwin. Any critique of identity must acknowledge the impetus for the genealogical excavation that seeks it. Indeed, in this case, the elaborately produced cultural absence of public black gay male identity creates the very conditions in which the signifier seems to offer a solution to what is experienced as a crisis of being. The queer utility of Baldwin here rests on the paradox that he disavows and thus engenders a critique of gay identity while simultaneously recognizing a responsibility to those who re-create him in the image of the black gay man they so need him to be.

Perhaps more disruptive to Baldwin’s place in the lineage imagined by black gay men of the 1980s is a comment mentioned in passing in Goldstein’s introduction to his interview. Goldstein found—not surprisingly, given Baldwin’s self-described “maverick” status—that the author “knew very little about the state of American gay life today: What’s a ‘clone,’ he wanted to know.” Baldwin then asked, “how is AIDS transmitted?” When we read that Baldwin claimed later in the interview that he was unaware of homophobia in the black church—“I don’t know of anyone who has ever denied his brother or his sister because they were gay”—doubts about Baldwin’s relevance begin to emerge. Again, the year of the interview is 1984. If the defiant and affirming homosexuality of Hemphill and Beam strikes a discordant but not false note of identification with Baldwin, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among black gay men (first Beam and then Hemphill would die in the epidemic, along with more than half of the contributors to Other Countries) and the record of religion-based homophobic shaming
and abandonment to which *Brother to Brother* itself testifies stand starkly against Baldwin’s knowledge and experience. When Baldwin’s remarks are framed against this evidence, one is compelled to ask, what was Baldwin’s legacy indeed? What are the implications, moreover, when the centrality of a touchstone such as Baldwin is not a purely academic matter of canonicity—specifically, when Baldwin’s importance as a “brother-forebear” takes on lifesaving, life-giving utility? Furthermore, what does it mean that the lives Baldwin helped to save were then threatened by certain forces from which the brother-forebear was so admittedly disconnected? Finally, how did Baldwin actually look to the black gay past, and how did he imagine his role in creating a black gay literary future? A backward glance is instructive.

The genealogy “should” begin with the “gay voices of the Harlem Renaissance,” including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen (Baldwin’s grade school teacher), Claude McKay, and Richard Bruce Nugent. Born in Harlem in 1924, Baldwin inhabited the space and time of these early queer writers. Yet neither they nor any other queer black writers were recognized by Baldwin as his major influences. Herb Boyd, in *Baldwin’s Harlem*, offers a detailed account of Baldwin’s relationships to Cullen and to Hughes, the latter of which was important, but equivocally so. Certainly Baldwin saw neither of these men as an indispensable professional or personal mentor. At one point, he explains that lack of connection with reference to class distinctions, recalling, “I knew of Langston and Countee Cullen, they were the only other black writers whose work I knew [as a youth], but for some reason they did not attract me. I’m not putting them down, but the world they were describing had nothing to do with me, at that time in my life. . . . The black middle class was essentially an abstraction to me.” It is perhaps curious that Baldwin would not have seen reflected in much of Hughes’s poetry the Harlem street life with which he was surrounded. Even more intriguing is that while the work of black, closeted, Harlem-based Cullen, whose poetry certainly models more classical forms and themes, did not resonate with Baldwin, the highly mannered novels of white, closeted, expatriated Henry James would lead Baldwin, upon his own expatriation, to claim James as his great literary influence. Richard Wright, of course, was the “father figure” that many critics saw Baldwin as having to “kill” in order to take his place, but Baldwin always thought that claim was overblown. Both Baldwin’s well-documented “agon” with Wright and his choice of James are indicative, however, of the more general case of Baldwin’s primary literary and intellectual engagements. Though Baldwin was one of twentieth-century America’s
great interlocutors, none of his most famous public dialogues were with other black gay men. Wright, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, Norman Mailer, and William F. Buckley Jr. offered Baldwin straight and/or white male figures against whom he could define himself and his work (precisely through the deployment, interestingly, of what one may call an oppositional erotics), while Lorraine Hansberry, Margaret Mead, Nikki Giovanni, and Audre Lorde provided sometimes sympathetic and often antagonistic points of intervention into Baldwin’s thinking about race and gender. Absent throughout his career is an extended black gay male dialogue.

One keenly wants the record to include, for example, a “rap on queer race” among Baldwin and his black gay contemporaries. Samuel Delany springs to mind. In the years before Baldwin died, Delany had already published some twenty-five books, including fourteen novels, several novellas, collections of short stories, critical works, and a memoir. For Delany, Baldwin had been an example of a gay writer working within yet painfully at odds with the language he had been given in order to articulate a “personal honesty.” As he searched for his own voice in the 1960s, Delany “thought about Baldwin and Vidal and Gide and Cocteau and Tellier again. They, at least, had talked about [homosexuality]. And however full of death and darkness their accounts had been, they’d at least essayed a certain personal honesty. And the thing about honesty is that all of ours is different. Maybe I just had to try my own.”

Delany seems to indicate here that it was partly despite and partly because of Baldwin’s example that he chose not to write queer literature for many years. He reminds Beam in an interview contained in the latter’s anthology *In the Life*, “[R]emember, my first five science fiction novels were written as ‘heterosexually’ as any homophobe could wish.” Delany has since become one of the most trenchant and certainly the most decorated of queer black male writers and cultural critics working today. That the very different black gay voices of Baldwin and Delany do not exist in direct and extended conversation, even though the two men were contemporaries, only further complicates and very well may undermine the construction of a queer black male literary tradition.

One wants, too, the voice of Bayard Rustin joined with Baldwin’s in shared thought. Asked in a March 1987 interview by Redvers Jeanmarie whether he knew Baldwin, Rustin replied, “Oh yes, I know Jimmy very well and I do read him. We were very close in the 1960s when he was in New York.” But where is the collaboration that might plumb the depths of that relationship, sharpening and broadening our understanding of the American
black gay male experience? Both Baldwin and Rustin would be dead by the year’s end, as would be Richard Bruce Nugent, who becomes especially interesting in this regard. Nugent’s short story “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” which appeared in the first and only issue of *Fire!!* magazine in November of 1926, was the first explicitly homoerotic story published by an African American writer. Nugent’s friend and editor Thomas H. Wirth notes that Baldwin’s 1956 novel *Giovanni’s Room* was the second. Though published thirty years apart, these works would seem to connect two important pioneers. The further historical coincidence that Baldwin and Nugent each died in 1987 provides a final point of literary and biographical connection. One seeks to put these men, somehow, in relationship. Yet they were never to communicate. Where one thinks to find a direct line of influence connecting Baldwin to a black queer literary predecessor or contemporary, none exists.

When Baldwin did attempt to situate himself within an artistic tradition, he most often looked not to literature but to music. Douglas Field notes that as early as 1959, “Baldwin acknowledged his debt, not to his literary antecedents of the Harlem Renaissance but to the blues singer Bessie Smith.” Indeed, Baldwin often described himself as an artist in terms more musical than writerly, most typically comparing himself precisely to singers such as Smith. That break with a specifically literary heritage becomes less figurative when integrated into the larger discussion of the “slippery” legacy of black gay writing that I am examining. When Pinckney suggests that upon moving to France in 1948, Baldwin “was thrown back onto his own speech, which was closer to that of Bessie Smith than it was to that of Henry James” (in whose tradition Baldwin sometimes claimed to write), a trajectory of black gay male writing from the Harlem Renaissance to Baldwin disappears altogether.

The introduction to Baldwin’s essay collection *The Price of the Ticket* offers the most explicit evidence that Baldwin, too, benefited from the influence of a black gay male mentor. Written in 1985, two years before the author’s death, the piece details the lifesaving presence of the man who, writes Baldwin, “in a less blasphemous place . . . would have been recognized as my Master and I as his Pupil.” That man was black gay painter Beauford Delaney, whom Baldwin credits with saving his life by showing him—or rather, by assuming—that he had inherent value. Delaney’s life and the lives of great black musicians from Louis Armstrong to Marian Anderson were opened to Baldwin, he tells us, “as part of my inheritance.” What Baldwin inherited, to be more specific, was a sense of responsibility to defy the terms
used by others to define his existence: “black,” “gay,” “male,” “writer”—terms of contestation, not connection.

Baldwin, like his would-be inheritors, keenly felt the necessity of self-creation as he confronted the faulty mirror held up before him by society. Similarly preoccupied, as the title of one of his early essays attests, with “a question of identity,” he pursued this question in much more oblique relation to a black gay male artistic lineage than did Hemphill and Beam. Most typically, Baldwin frames his search for identity in terms of the racial distortions with which he has been presented.

Obviously I wasn’t white—it wasn’t so much a question of wanting to be white—but I didn’t quite know anymore what being black meant. I couldn’t accept what I had been told. All you are ever told in this country about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and re-create yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America. You have to impose, in fact—this may sound very strange—you have to decide who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its idea of you.60

To today’s “empowered” audience, the action Baldwin calls for in this passage may seem difficult but nonetheless straightforward. Do not buy into “labels,” particularly racial ones. Indeed, to offer but two examples, this sage advice has been followed in the most dangerous and crippling of ways by “post-race” ideologues who mouth words purposefully distant from reality and by a generation of young people unsure of how to identify and discuss the pervasive, subtle, and often liberal forms of what Ann Ducille calls “periracism” (aka racism). Baldwin, by contrast, insists that the act of self-recreation, indicatively raced, requires a sustained and even forced confrontation both with “oneself” (“you have to really dig down into yourself”) and with the world (“with its idea of you”). Baldwin’s writerly obsession with tropes of naming reflects the endless, multidirectional confrontation that is the search for self. Spelling his proper name would become Baldwin’s lifelong project, an almost infinitely complex rectification of terms. His essays include “Nobody Knows My Name” and “No Name in the Street”; his favorite maxim was “Know whence you came”; and he characterized his namelessness best, perhaps, in calling himself a “Bastard of the West,” the progeny of a country that dared not face the terrifying terms of its union. Certainly Baldwin spent a lifetime telling and retelling his own story. In his
fiction, essays, speeches, and interviews, Baldwin endlessly reconstructed the terms of his existence in a remarkable effort not to be dominated by them.

More than finding or discovering his name (or his identity), then, Baldwin understood his charge to be the even greater necessity—and responsibility—of inventing his name. That act of creation takes place throughout his oeuvre, but a special relationship exists between Baldwin's fiction and acts of self-creation. This is not because Baldwin's fiction allowed him freedom from reality but, rather, because he understood it as allowing for a kind of radical re-viewing of the self. Go Tell It on the Mountain represents Baldwin's first sustained effort at "deciding" who he was. Because the novel also appears to be his most autobiographical, it offers a special opportunity to foreground the idea that Baldwin's fiction operates not as a reflection of the self or reality but as a mode of inquiry by which he addressed the incessant question of identity for himself and in the presence of the public. Reid-Pharr, in his analysis of "desire, choice, and black masculinity in post-war America," thus sees Baldwin's aesthetic (especially in his late work Just Above My Head) primarily as a black intellectual's reclamation of the freedom of "choosing and re-choosing" one's identity amid the social boundaries, including literary ones, of what constitutes a legitimate subject. For Reid-Pharr, Baldwin's lesson is that "[t]he privacy and sacredness of the individual and the individual's body must be maintained even and especially at the moment at which that individual offers up his own life story as a potent metaphor for the reality and the promise of the human condition."61

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN
AS A MODE OF INQUIRY

If "tradition" offers an unsatisfactory model, how might we differently conceptualize Baldwin's queer utility? What guidance does the author himself offer in his fiction to help us understand the tradition he centers but does not reference? Sylvander rightly argues that "[t]he point [of Go Tell It on the Mountain] is the impact of history—personal and collective—on an individual, whether or not that individual is aware of the history."62 In a gesture that would become part of what he considered a social imperative, Baldwin looks to the past in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Specifically, he turns to a story of familial inheritance, in an effort not merely to locate but to re-create himself and, in turn, his relations to others.
The epigraph to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*—“I looked down the line, And I wondered”—helps to introduce and underscore the novel’s concern about historical location as understood through John Grimes’s positioning within his family. The “I” in this epigraph surely refers to the novel’s young protagonist, and these lines indicate that John is on the threshold of a journey. On the brink of his adolescence, he has come to a doubly anticipatory moment, expected by his church congregation to follow his father in the pulpit, yet urged by puberty and disdain for his father toward more worldly, including sexual, explorations. John looks down the line and wonders what his future path will be, but the ambiguous first paragraph of the novel tells us that by the time John had really begun to think about it, “it was already too late.”

Family history had long since arrived to set John on his course. Troubling his place within that history, John’s homoerotic inclinations shortly become undeniable. His masturbatory fantasies of slightly older boys represent one clear site of confrontation between his burgeoning sexuality and the Pentecostal religious tradition that defines those new longings as “sinful.”

If John is looking ahead, Baldwin—the other “I”—is looking down the line, too. But the writer’s gaze is cast backward, in an effort to understand whence he came. The novel thus represents a particular kind of personal history, an exploration, through fiction, of Baldwin’s own place amid his predecessors. Although *Go Tell It on the Mountain* may seem autobiographical, Baldwin saw a more nuanced relationship to the novel.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* was about my relationship to my father and to the church, which is the same thing really. It was an attempt to exorcise something, to find out what happened to my father, what happened to all of us, what had happened to me—to John—and how we were to move from one place to another. Of course it seems rather personal, but the book is not *about* John, the book is not *about* me.

In effect, just where a black man—or, as I will argue, a black gay man—might think he has found a novel explicitly *about* him, Baldwin hedges, unwilling to make a straightforward identification. Rather, the metaphor he chooses connotes a separation from within the self: an exorcism.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is not a recollection and portrayal of authentic experience or identity, be that identity “black” or “black gay male”; rather, it represents a mode of historical inquiry. That inquiry is not personal, not “about” John/Baldwin, because Baldwin cannot say who he is—precisely
because he does not know—in order to write about himself. He knows only that the names he has been given, like those given to his ancestors, are powerful historical fictions. Stuart Hall’s definition of identity—“[i]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, narratives of the past”65—summarizes Baldwin’s own, for Baldwin consistently discusses identity with reference to history, as in a 1965 essay entitled “White Man’s Guilt.” I quote it at length to demonstrate Baldwin’s sustained attention to the issue, as well as to provide a sense of the eloquence with which he conducted his critique of historical identity.

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one’s point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.66

The lesson learned by those creatures “despised by history” is that the past must be excavated, rather than merely retold, if one’s humanity is to be liberated. Baldwin would distill this message into one of his most famous warnings: “Know whence you came.” In the first of two epistles joined to form the book The Fire Next Time, Baldwin repeats this advice. The letter, entitled “My Dungeon Shook,” is written to Baldwin’s nephew “on the One-Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” revealing Baldwin’s own sense that we can somehow help future generations to “go behind the white man’s definitions . . . [and] to spell your proper name,”67 thus changing history and one’s place/name in it.

By extension, the connection Baldwin seeks and encourages in readers does not rely on an ethnic identity model of the “self.” But what does it mean when the act of positioning or imagining oneself historically within the particular narrative of the past made manifest by one’s family history, as Bald-
win does in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, reneges on its ties to the expressly personal—“the book is not about me”—and endeavors instead toward less “personal” connections to others? Put another way, just how are people connected by experiences, especially their experiences of love and desire, that do not rely on the logic of identity? Baldwin well understood the identity trouble exposed by this question, casting that trouble once again in racial terms in his 1977 essay “Every Good-Bye Ain’t Gone.” How, he wonders, when “[s]ome things had happened to me because I was black, and some things had happened to me because I was me,” was he “to discover the demarcation line, if there was one”? He continues,

How to perceive, define, a line nearly too thin for the naked eye, so mercurial, and so mighty. . . . Being black affected one’s life span, insurance rates, blood pressure, lovers, children, every dangerous hour of every dangerous day. There was absolutely no way not to be black without ceasing to exist. But it frequently seemed that there was no way to be black, either, without ceasing to exist.68

As a story that navigates the space between “me” and “blackness”—and “gayness” as well—*Go Tell It on the Mountain* functions as a radical and fundamentally queer genealogy whereby reconstructing a family’s history of desire becomes a means of crafting historical connections and affiliations beyond one’s own “family,” where family stands both as a marker of black identity and, in its now-familiar reappropriation, as a trope for gay communal identity. The novel therefore offers the opportunity for a localized investigation that takes the specific institution of the African American family as the site at which sexual identity formations can be fictionally and historically contested as new relations are articulated. In that it promotes a vision of connections that both are and are not identity based, Baldwin’s inquiry into family history becomes the context through which extra-textual tensions between black/gay identity and queer non-identity can be exploited and explored.

**HOMOSEXUALITY, THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY, AND NON-TRADITION**

I turn now to Roderick Ferguson, who offers an important model for situating black gay men within what might be called a “non-tradition.” Strikingly,
Ferguson reads black gay men as fully immersed within and even representative of the seemingly traditional context of the black family. To do so, he relies on the crucial reformulation of the African American family as a nonheteronormative construct, arguing that “[l]ocating African-American racial formation outside the boundaries of the heteropatriarchal household compels an alignment between blackness and other nonheteronormative formations such as homosexuality.” Refusing to “discus[s] the intersections of race and sexuality without addressing homosexual difference,” Ferguson maintains instead “that homosexuality is at the center of such an intervention.”

With Ferguson’s aid, I thus draw together the terms “non-traditional” and “nonheteronormative,” as each connotes alternative relationships to dominant, “traditional” power structures. In other words, the concept of nonheteronormativity allows me to follow Ferguson’s queer of color critique in connecting black gay men to each other and to the black family in nontraditional ways.

Working at the intersection of American sociology and African American literature in his essay “The Nightmares of the Heteronormative,” Ferguson treats African American difference not as natural but as that which is to be explained. Ferguson argues that black difference is the product of a rationalizing Enlightenment discourse that locates the defining mark of race via the construction of the nonheteronormative black family.

African-American familial forms and gender relations have been regarded as perversions of the American family ideal. To resituate the authority of those ideals, questions concerning material exclusion—as they pertain to African-Americans—have historically been displaced onto African-American sexual and familial practices, conceptualizing African-American racial difference as a violation of the heteronormative demands that underlie liberal values. As figures of nonheteronormative perversions, straight African-Americans were reproductive rather than productive, heterosexual but never heteronormative. This construction of African-American sexuality as wild, unstable, and undomesticated locates African-American sexuality within the irrational and therefore outside the bounds of the citizenship machinery. Though African-American homosexuality, unlike its heterosexual counterpart, symbolized a rejection of heterosexuality, neither could claim heteronormativity.

Ferguson’s argument helpfully changes the terms of the debate about John’s sexuality in Go Tell It on the Mountain and, by extension, the sexuality
of “black gay male” readers who perhaps identify with him or with Baldwin. While he recognizes heterosexual/homosexual difference within African American families, Ferguson changes the perspective from which that difference is viewed. He moves beyond the explanatory power of the heterosexual/homosexual paradigm by arguing that the sexuality of all African Americans has been reoriented through the construction of the nonheteronormative black family. One primary goal and effect of that construction has been the material exclusion of African American families, although that disenfranchisement has usually then been interpreted only as the result and not as the cause of the African American familial “disorganization.” Ferguson argues that nonheteronormative black households took a variety of forms, but what these “pervasive” family units had in common was their distance from ideals of the capitalist state: “Common law marriage, out-of-wedlock births, lodgers, single-headed families, and unattached individuals are all indicators of African-American disorganization defined in terms of its distance from heterosexual and nuclear intimate arrangements that are rationalized through American law and cultural norms that valorize heterosexual monogamy and patriarchal domesticity.” He concludes that “[i]n the United States of the early twentieth century, the heteronormative household was rendered as almost a ‘material impossibility’ for people of color.”

Ferguson interprets the finale of Go Tell It on the Mountain as Baldwin’s most straightforward confrontation with the myths of the Enlightenment, “those fictions of progress, universal access, and universal identity that disavow particularities even as they articulate them.” Baldwin’s response, according to Ferguson, was to redeploy the very terms by which black families have been disenfranchised, privileging and making productive their status as nonheteronormative subjects: “The re-articulation of queer identity posits a new valuation of black inner-city communities as sites of a regenerative non-heteronormativity, establishing a link between reconfigurations of African-American queer identity and African-American culture.” I find Ferguson’s argument that black meets queer on a common ground to be a powerfully reorienting and productive critique, especially in that it implicitly responds to Holland’s call to reformulate “tradition” to include black gay representation.

Tracing the Grimes family’s genealogy of desire reveals at least as many materially and figuratively “queer” connections as heteronormative ones, as many loves that dare not speak their name as ones that are publicly respectable. To understand John’s desire, one must view it in the context of these other unspeakable unions, each of which bequeaths to John a history of de-
sire as struggle—a struggle far beyond the realm of sexual identity categories. John’s mother, Elizabeth, struggles with the illicit desire of a young girl lodging with an unconcerned aunt who is more interested in holding séances than chaperoning her niece. Unparented and unrestrained, the young Elizabeth falls in love with Richard, a poor, defiantly self-educated man who has been made paranoid by racial bias and a lifetime of being “sent down the line” by black relatives. Although their child is conceived out of wedlock after Richard’s suicide, Elizabeth is unrepentant; Richard’s voice thus continues to haunt Elizabeth, pleasurably, and betrays her lack of faith not only in the strength of God’s love but also in the ideals of a stable nuclear family. John’s stepfather, Gabriel, harbors, in his youth, an illicit desire for the servant girl whom he impregnates but casts away. His subsequent attachment to his first wife, Deborah, stems not from normative love but from the need for self-aggrandizement. He marries her in the spirit of holy one-upsmanship: “It came to him that, as the Lord had given him Deborah, to help him to stand, so the Lord had sent him to her, to raise her up, to release her from that dishonor which was hers in the eyes of men” (105). With their marriage already marked as unconventional because Deborah is barren, Gabriel’s proposal is exposed as a form of masturbatory self-pleasure, the pleasure he takes in condescending to marry the social outcast. Florence, John’s aunt and Gabriel’s sister, embraces a self-defeating and destructive love, for in her inability to hold strong against the “common” charms of her husband, Frank, she turns against her own principle of hating poor black men. With neither love nor hate capable of sustaining her, Florence waits to die alone in a rented room, on the fringes of both her family and society.

Following Ferguson, we see that the desires of John’s relatives, created and complicated by race, class, and gender as much as any sexual identity, cannot be viewed as simply heterosexual. This is true not only when compared to heteronormative social relations but when compared to each other, for desire is not normative in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Amid, rather than strictly against, these non-normative loves emerges John’s desire. He stands, in other words, within a genealogy in which one incessantly struggles with, rather than merely naming, one’s erotic impulses. Because Baldwin recognizes that black communities in Harlem are already queer, his sexual queerness neither places him automatically outside that cultural system nor causes him necessarily to reach beyond it in his search for queer identity. Rather, Harlem’s queer layering provides a richness capable of sustaining that act of discovery.
Implicit in Ferguson’s writing is the unpredictability of the space of queer re-articulation. That very unpredictability, however, compels a critical departure from Ferguson’s queer impulse to revalue or “reaffirm” the nonheteronormative at the moment of John’s “salvation.” As is typical of my larger study of queer paradox, I here want to resist the slippage between positing a nonheteronormative location and assuming queer liberation. As I will argue in chapter 3, seemingly queer contact zones can dangerously reinforce normative power relations. John’s trial and ultimate redemption in part 3 of the novel, “The Threshing Floor,” need not—and, I think, do not—result in his “rebirth into nonheteronormative affirmation.” Rather, the novel ends with a vision of contested awakenings and cyclical struggle. After his long night lying before the altar with the saints standing over him and with the slightly older and much-adored Elisha in particular “praying him through,” John is saved. As the church members walk home in twos and threes—John with Elisha; his father, Gabriel, with his Aunt Florence; and his mother, Elizabeth, with several sisters of the small congregation—Harlem briefly becomes a world of revelation, a world revealed within a world. John looks around himself with new eyes and perceives that “[n]ow the storm was over. And the avenue, like any landscape that has endured a storm, lay changed under Heaven, exhausted and clean, and new. Not again, forever, could it return to the avenue it once had been” (219–20). The young man with a “new name [written] down in glory” (225) believes in this moment that his outward vision reflects his own transformation. John feels physically changed, “for his hands were new, and his feet were new, and he moved in a new and Heaven-bright air” (209). Helping John to stand fast is Elisha, who, walking him to his door, “kissed John on the forehead, a holy kiss. . . . The sun had come full awake. . . . It fell over Elisha like a golden robe, and struck John’s forehead, where Elisha had kissed him, like a seal ineffaceable forever” (225).

If “John’s newfound wholeness is consecrated by Elisha giving John a ‘holy kiss,’” however, that wholeness surely will not last. Readers must here recall Gabriel’s own conversion experience, during which the rural landscape seemed similarly changed—“here was a new beginning, a blood-washed day!”—just as Gabriel’s hands seemed to become “new hands” and his feet to become “new feet.” Yet Gabriel fell from that spiritual height, just as John, too, will fall. Almost immediately John’s vision of the “exhausted and clean, and new” avenue partially dissolves, becoming a double vision.

Yet the houses were there, as they had been; the windows, like a thousand, blinded eyes, stared outward at the morning—at the morning
that was the same for them as the mornings of John's innocence, and the mornings before his birth. The water ran in the gutters with a small, disconnected sound; on the water traveled paper, burnt matches, sodden cigarette-ends; gobs of spittle, green-yellow, brown, and pearly, the leavings of a dog, the vomit of a drunken man, the dead sperm, trapped in a rubber, of one abandoned to his lust. (220)

The avenue so quickly has returned to what it once had been; in fact, it has never changed, though John's relationship to it has. The great “eyes” of the urban landscape look upon John, unmoved, and the voices of the neighborhood boys will continue to ring out cruelly, “Hey, Frog-eyes!” John senses in this moment not that he is one with the neighborhood, his family, and its history but rather that has must struggle anew within them: “[h]e would weep again, . . . for now his weeping had begun; he would rage again, said the shifting air, for the lions of rage had been unloosened; he would be in darkness again, in fire again, now that he had seen the fire and the darkness” (220–21). If nonheteronormativity is regenerative here, it is nevertheless a brutally isolating rebirth. Baldwin's imagery projects even starker reminders of the deprivations of racial disenfranchisement and religious homophobia because they are set against John's new vision of Harlem redeemed and his new badge of honor, Elisha's kiss. Even this queer, holy kiss, witnessed by the threatening stepfather, takes its place in a cycle of struggle: “Out of joy strength came, strength that was fashioned to bear sorrow: sorrow brought forth joy. Forever? This was Ezekiel's wheel, in the middle of the burning air forever” (221).

Ferguson also argues that John's rebirth in “The Threshing Floor” partially results from the subject of the preceding chapter, “Elizabeth's Prayer.” That rebirth, he writes, “refers to Elizabeth's understanding that freely chosen love [as opposed to heteronormative, institutionalized love] is an index of personal freedom. In this context, Baldwin begins to re-articulate the meaning of African-American nonheteronormativity via a reinterpretation of Christian salvation.” But Elizabeth's attitude on the walk home is so darkly ambivalent that it is difficult to attribute to her a vision of John's “self-affirmation.” As the church sisters counsel Elizabeth that “the Lord done raised you up a holy son. He going to comfort your gray hairs” (212), Elizabeth cries slow, bitter tears. For even as the sisters praise God, she hears speaking to her heart her first lover, John's biological father, Richard, dead by suicide after unjust imprisonment: “You remember that day when you come into the store? . . . Well—you was mighty pretty” (213). This voice reminds
Elizabeth that she had loved and attempted to save Richard once and could not; neither can she now save John: “[S]he knew that her weeping and her prayers were in vain. What was coming would surely come; nothing could stop it” (177). In Elizabeth’s eyes at least, there has been no reconfiguration of African American identity; she sees no “emergent identifications and social relations.” Even to John, his mother’s “smile remained unreadable; he could not tell what it hid” (225). Rather than an inheritance of queer freedom, Elizabeth’s smile hides the queer history of love’s ongoing struggle to be free.

How else, then, other than through tropes of liberation that characterize the queer theoretical imagination, can John’s salvation be read with reference to the nonheteronormative genealogy of desire of which he is a part? Does nonheteronormativity need to be made regenerative in response to its racist, capitalist construction? Baldwin criticized Enlightenment thinking in places too numerous to mention. But I am questioning whether an affirmational nonheteronormativity must replace the terms (“disorganization,” “perversion,” “reproduction”) in which the Enlightenment has cloaked African American queerness. Rather than reading Baldwin’s first novel as an attempt at an inverted revaluation of queer family ties, I read it as a search for new terms that he does not yet find. The much-interpreted “holy kiss” offers a prime example of the unclear, multiple, mediated messages that swarm around John at the novel’s end. In writing that “Baldwin’s own position as a subject who is racialized as black triggered an estrangement from the Enlightenment that became the site within which new epistemologies, new historiographies, and new aesthetics were yearned for and elaborated,” Ferguson perfectly lays out the background of Baldwin’s fictional inquiry. We might stop short, though, of claims that in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin imagined into being the new knowledges he knew must be invented.

The line I am trying to draw Ferguson’s queer of color critique backward is one of complex emergence, the dynamic area where “emergent identifications and social relations” need not lead one to posit “a new valuation of black inner-city communities as sites of a regenerative nonheteronormativity.” It is the same line I will draw between “gay” and “queer” in a variety of ways in this book, where the former seems the sign of normative oppression (i.e., identity) and the latter seems the revalued reformulation that escapes the trap of identity. I think that neither characterization is always accurate and that the supposed trajectory from the first to the second employs a potentially dangerous teleology of progress and liberation. The line or marginal space I have identified is what Christopher Nealon, in a wonderful es-
James Baldwin’s Queer Utility

say titled “Queer Tradition,” calls “the residual gap between gay and queer.”

This residual gap represents “a zone between articulate tradition and inarticulate yearning, and stages the becoming-articulate of something that had seemed too simple or obvious or painful to survive passage into language.” I represent that gap as the space between history and the individual; between the tradition that Hemphill searched for and the “always, now” that bursts through that tradition in (re)recalling him and his work; between queer utility and queer imagination.

Ferguson is strikingly important in that he offers a way not only to reread John’s desire but to rethink black gay male desire by placing each within its larger context of—or better, one of its larger contexts of—desirous and intimate relations. By contextualizing the differences made by black gay male identity within a broader understanding of nonheteronormative relations—and I have tried explicitly to contrast that with how black gay male identity has been situated in the larger tradition of African American literature—Ferguson unsettles the stability of that identity. Crucially, he disrupts black gay male identity not by casting it—and identity generally—aside but by reconnecting it to other identity formations constructed in the same racialized socio-economic space, the space of the African American family. To be a black gay man is to be different, but the meaning of that difference is at least partially created by a relation of similarity to other nonheteronormative, including heterosexual, positions. In other words, in the context of the nonheteronormative African American family, the black gay man signifies not only as racially same and sexually different but also as sexually same (nonheteronormative).

This complication of identity through the contextualization of desire, or what I have also called the construction of a genealogy of desire, can be said to produce a queer subject, one not completely removed from the benefits and perils of sexual identity but also not beholden to that sexual identity as the only or most useful way of understanding desire and connections with others.

By producing John as a desiring subject in Go Tell It on the Mountain, Baldwin teaches that even though one may not exist within a sexual category (even though one may be queer), queerness nevertheless has a context. John is probably gay, but by virtue of his family’s history of desire, he is also, perhaps more importantly, queer. Non-identity, so privileged by queer poststructuralists, does not spring from nothing; it is not an absence. Rather, a queer subjectivity emerges out of the web of desires that have touched us in particular ways, as within African American family life. To the extent that
we are ignorant of our genealogies of desire and our queer traditions, we will more readily feel alone and, inevitably, will more readily seek out the kinds of identity-based connections that Hemphill saw as necessary. But to the extent that we can construct our histories of desire (whether we look to our family histories, our sexual histories, or other contexts) and to the extent that we can contextualize our desires broadly rather than thinking of them strictly in line with or in opposition to other desires, we can potentially achieve a rewarding queer subject position outside of—but not out of sight of—sexual identities.

I have suggested here that interactions in and with literature can help to construct subcultural domains in which the paradox of queer tradition can be negotiated. The African American family, as Ferguson points out, is another of those subcultural locations. The artist’s imagined relationship to his or her forerunners can be yet another node through which queer connections that draw on but do not entirely depend on racial and sexual identity can be made and exploited. Ultimately, queer genealogies stand necessarily alongside of the ethnic identity model of sexuality, helping to orient and connect individuals as they seek to explain their experiences of desire.