James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination

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Conclusion

The Queer Imagination and the Gay Male Conundrum

[G]ay male sexuality is as prone as any other mode of sexual expression to contradictions not entirely reducible to bad social arrangements. By attributing the inevitable suffering and struggle for power between intimately related individuals to the nefarious influence of patriarchal culture, gay and lesbian activists have found a convenient if rather mean-spirited way of denying human distress. To admit that being a gay man or a lesbian involves a certain sexual specificity, and even to go so far as to wonder about the psychic structures and origins of that specificity, might implicate us in that distress by forcing us to see the gay take on what is politically unfixable in the human.

— Leo Bersani, Homos

Part of the dilemma was how in the world, first of all, to treat a black woman . . . , how to deal with a black girl whom you knew you couldn’t protect unless you were prepared to work all your life in the post office, unless you were prepared to make bargains I was temperamentally unfitted to make?

— James Baldwin, A Rap on Race

James Baldwin believed in things not seen. The evidence was everywhere. The writer’s sense of belief was forged in his early experience of religious mystery. Indeed, the phrase “the evidence of things not seen” is drawn from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews. Paul writes, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” One cannot help but acknowledge the importance of the original vehicle for this message in Baldwin’s life, religion, even when that message finds a new mode of transport in the queer imagination. In this book, I have argued that it is by virtue of his dazzling queer imaginative capacity that Baldwin substantiates in writing the nearly unimaginable truths simultaneously created by and submerged
in the currents of race and sex. His exploration of half-glimpsed reality was sometimes desperate, often hopeful, and always dogged. Indeed, the author’s underappreciated late work on the Atlanta child murders that takes as its title a portion of the preceding scripture might be read as nothing so much as Baldwin’s most straightforward and literal indictment of the tampered-with evidence of American life, the racialized judicial system being the surreal but official context in which “proof” is determined, patterns of “reality” woven, and “truth” found. Challenging the official story (e.g., the “false question of integration” that “as we could all testify, simply by looking at the colors of our skins, had, long ago, been accomplished”), Baldwin argued that what had first to be discovered by piecing together the evidence of life were the “hidden laws”—the “unspoken but profound assumptions on the part of the people”—that governed society. For Baldwin, the writer’s job was to expose the product of those laws, the “myth of America.” Further, by recovering “a sense of the mysterious and inexorable limits of life, a sense, in a word, of tragedy,” the artist had to create “a new sense of life’s possibilities.” This book’s primary thesis is that, in its endless examination of American sexual and racial laws that everywhere circumscribe life’s possibilities, Baldwin’s fiction recasts the evidence into a case for queer reality.

My use of the “queer imagination” has been, I hope, continually problematized throughout this book. The use of the singular “imagination” belies not only the multiplicity of the term “queer” but also (because “multiplicity,” too, now seems to contain flatly positive connotations) the fact that “queer” can mark as many imaginative failures as successes. The queer imagination, as I have charted it here, represents a curiously sprawling creative map on which some mountains—but not others—can be moved, sometimes. I thus want to make the case for a critical framework that capitalizes on the unpredictable success of “queer” as a navigation system for liberatory thought and action. I call this framework the queer imagination, and it provides a theoretical tool for reading queer texts. Mapping the paradoxicality of the queer imagination enables me to argue ever more strongly for Baldwin’s queer creativity as an aesthetic mode, but it also compels an analysis of the shifting borders of queer thought. This inquiry can thus be added to the list of other works that offer a critique of queerness from within queer studies.

I have been fascinated by what I have called, in chapter 3, Baldwin’s queer “failures.” While giving much importance to the fact that all texts are historically situated cultural products, I have felt, time and again, that the boundedness of Baldwin’s queer imagination suggests other delimiting fac-
tors. At times, Baldwin outruns many cultural constructions and ideologies that grip his historical context, even as his imagination seems reined in by others. The queer imagination fluctuates as it seeks to articulate the bounds that queerness tests, penetrates, and fails to penetrate. The power of Baldwin’s queer imagination, the power of queer theory’s multiperspectival approaches to his work, thus ceaselessly outrun recontainment in some—but only some—ways. Queerness does not, I am saying, represent a totality, a goal, a utopic vision. While we must always push queerness into the boundaries, we must also prepare ourselves for what we might call the shock of queer failure—as part of the same emancipatory project. If the contours of the queer imagination must be traced not only as a matter of what is, but also what is not possibly thought, what accounts for the complexities of queer formations?

A second impulse of this book, then, has been to think critically about the queer imagination, both Baldwin’s and the larger speculative energy developed in queer intellectual culture and deployed in the academy. This critical bent allows for a discussion of the strange ruptured-ness of queer creative thought. As I argued earlier, because “queer” contains an underlying imperative (queer!), it operates as an insistent speech act, prompting the user to do what it says; that is, “queer” layers and indeed belabors its own deployment by demanding a state of “ever-queerness” that cannot be sustained. However, beyond the predictably ever-failing project of making queerness new lurk thornier failures and breaches. Can a queer imagination be misogynist? Can a racist erotic be queer? Can queer thinking produce heteronormativity and homophobia? The answer to all of these questions, as the individual chapters of this book have argued, is yes, and the implication is that a radical tension and a central paradox is characteristic—and perhaps even definitional—of the very term “queer.” But how to further explain these ruptures?

I want to point briefly to one final explanatory framework that is evocative of the kind of paradox in which I have been interested. I do not mean to pursue a rigorous application of this paradigm, nor do I wish to suggest that it exhausts the possibilities for understanding queer imaginative ruptures. Rather, it is useful to me because it introduces a certain unanswerability into the question, and I want to install this unanswerability as a feature of queerness. I want to suggest that perhaps the queer imagination is replete with what Jonathan Lear, in his philosophical rendering of Freud’s unconscious, calls “motivated irrationality.” Lear argues against interpreting the uncon-
scious as a “second mind,” a formulation that inherently attributes rationality to what he says is a dynamic characterized by a lack of intentionality and, more importantly, by an absence of reasoning. The unconscious is marked not only by hidden reasons for thought, action, and feeling—a second, secret mind set at odds with a conscious mind, though operating with a similarly rational coherence—but, even more crucially, by the disruption, the short-circuiting, of reasoning itself. Freud’s “strange” and compelling claim, for Lear, is that “people can be motivated to be irrational.” From this perspective, we do not do things, unconsciously, for reasons. The mystery of the unconscious is not to be found in the hiddenness of our motivations and desires but in their imperviousness to rational explanation. I want to think of what I have called the “unqueer” undercurrent of the queer imagination as, at least in part, similarly unexplainable, driven not only by invisible anti-queer logics—though I want to preserve this definition as well—but by a strategic unreasonability. The queer imagination may well contain a hidden normative impulse, but it also may harbor a more unwieldy interruptive mechanism than normativity. We might not set queerness in simple opposition to normative thinking, might not only argue that we have normative unconscious reasons—unexamined privilege, for instance—for undermining queerness. The pressures of normativity, real as they are, might not disrupt queerness from this perspective; in fact, in their rational narrativization, norms may instead disrupt our understanding of irrational, non-narrativizable disruptions of queerness. In short, the queer imagination might be marked by stranger contradictions and surprises than normative reasoning can imagine but that help to construct a creative field of both unpredictable liberation and blindsiding limitation. The value, the meaning of queer creativity, therefore, cannot simply be asserted as a positivity at odds with a normative negativity (an unequerness) but must, rather, be made tenuous through the elaboration of the irrationalities of queer paradox. For this reason, it makes great sense to claim Baldwin as queer, but only as part of a project of investigating those parts of his writing that make no rational sense.

“Baldwin’s” Unrepresentable Women

To reformulate the preceding question in one final way, the remainder of this conclusion will explore Baldwin’s queer imaginative relationships (both representational and interpersonal) with women. Throughout this book, I
have dramatized the fact that while Baldwin sometimes seems to purposefully re-create and sustain queer paradoxes (e.g., men literally reproduce race together), there are other times when his imagination seems itself queerly circumscribed and thus unaware of its paradoxicality (e.g., straight male-male sex remains longed for but unimaginable). The paradigmatic case here is his failure to portray women authentically and, specifically, to incorporate lesbian desire in his fiction. Why are lesbians unrepresented in and, indeed, seemingly unrepresentable for Baldwin? This absence of representation occurs, strikingly, even though several of Baldwin’s most important and very public intellectual engagements were with feminists and lesbians, including Lorraine Hansberry, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Margaret Mead. He does not succeed in renegotiating a pervasive masculinist worldview, even as he enters into lengthy and forthright dialogue with these feminist women. The point is not merely that Baldwin was not feminist enough, a concern raised by Joseph Beam in his short essay, “James Baldwin: Not a Bad Legacy, Brother.” The point is that he was not feminist (enough) even though he well might have been given his sincere investment in dialogue with feminists. Similarly, his failure to portray lesbians in his fiction is not remarkable except that he engaged personally and publically with several of the most important lesbian artists and thinkers of the twentieth century. Asking how it was possible for Baldwin not to represent the very women with whom he interacted so meaningfully and consistently outside of his fiction might seem rather backward, except that, while Baldwin went to pains to create in his fiction wide and nuanced spectrums of sexuality, he never portrayed a lesbian. Although it is difficult to grapple with the concept of queer imaginative absence, such creative voids, or unqueer ruptures, must be explained rather than naturalized.

The most extensive study of Baldwin’s representations of women is Trudier Harris’s 1985 *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. Harris sets the standard for thinking about Baldwin’s women by initiating a sustained conversation “designed to fill a gap in Baldwin scholarship”8 and, more generally, in the critical literature about black female fictional characters. Fair-minded throughout her book, Harris argues that while “Baldwin has given more serious attention, over a long period of time and through many more works, to portraits of black women,”9 “no woman is ultimately so acceptable to Baldwin that she is to be viewed as equal to the prominent male characters.”10 In the consistency of his portrayals of women, Baldwin compares favorably to other black male writers of his day, including Ralph
Ellison and Richard Wright, yet Harris sees a representational veil shrouding these depictions: “black women we see in Baldwin’s fiction, then, are usually at least twice removed—by way of Baldwin and his narrators—and are sometimes distanced through other layers as well. . . . [T]hey are not free of the creator who continues to draw in their potential for growth on the short rein of possibility.” Ultimately, Harris argues that the question of black women in Baldwin’s fiction “centers upon value—how much value black women have to the males in their lives and how much value they can see in themselves without the yardstick of masculine evaluation.” Women “lose interest” for Baldwin, Harris concludes, precisely to the extent that they fail to measure up to, for, and even as men. Extending Harris, lesbian women “lose interest” for Baldwin because they are women who do not exist along the measure of male eroticism. “Interest” becomes the naturalized gatekeeper at the threshold of imagination to the extent that erotic interest goes unremarked.

Like Harris, David Ikard notes a general black male patriarchal orientation toward black women in "Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism." Beginning that study with an analysis of Bigger Thomas’ misogynist formulation of Bessie’s postmortem self-sacrifice, Ikard draws Richard Wright into a common black masculinist ideological tradition with Amiri Baraka, who “reinforces the idea that black men’s experiences of oppression are normative,” as well as with Chester Himes. However, explicitly distancing himself from Harris’s position, Ikard then contrasts the Baldwin of Go Tell It on the Mountain to these patriarchal black male writers, arguing that Baldwin “casts light on the process by which black men rationalize their domination of black women.” Ikard continues his reading of “black patriarchy and the dilemma of black women’s complicity” by attempting to place Baldwin beyond the reach of two forms of “attack”: “While [Baldwin’s] maverick status on gender, race, and cultural issues came at a high social cost—making him an easy target for homophobic black nationalists like Cleaver and hard-line feminists like [Trudier] Harris—they helped pave the way for important and necessary investigations into black patriarchy.” Alternatively, I want to suggest that Baldwin’s positioning as a black queer “maverick,” which gives him a special perspective on sexual and gender norms, especially as they consolidate around race, might also be said to particularize his brand of raced sexism rather than to remove him from the its grip. For when Ikard argues that Baldwin “accounts for the ways that black women are oppressed as women within the patriarchal structure of black community,” he
conceives of those women as necessarily heterosexual, as did Baldwin. Neither does Harris’s study address this different gap in Baldwin scholarship, namely, the failure to consider that when the author declines to represent lesbians at all (and therefore declines to represent women authentically), he does so as a queer black man. Harris does not fully consider—and, in fact, explicitly rejects—the possibility that Baldwin’s sexuality was important to his literary treatment of women. She nevertheless implicitly raises the difficult question of how gay men value women in their lives according to their own, perhaps different, yardstick of masculine valuation. I want to examine here, more specifically, how that valuation relates to the absence of lesbian representation in Baldwin’s fiction.¹⁸

I suggest that Baldwin’s search for masculine valuation as a black gay man reflects a paradoxical kind of authorial interestedness in his fiction. That localized and specific interestedness helps to determine, which is not to say over-determine, his imaginative capacities. Harris resists this interpretive avenue.

There is also a tendency in a study like this to bring the author’s personal life to bear upon the discussion. In practically all of the lectures I gave on the topic prior to the appearance of this book, someone in the audience asked how I thought Baldwin’s life-style explained his portrayal of black women. I can only say here what I said again and again in those lectures; too much of what Baldwin has written has been explained away, commented upon, or otherwise treated in the context of his personal life, and too many of his essays have been used to interpret the literature. I have tried to resist that urge in this study, except for the elements of Go Tell It on the Mountain that are factually tied to Baldwin’s biography. Otherwise, I have tried to remain within the realm of the created works for my discussions and to allow commentary to evolve from within the text instead of superimposing external notions onto the text.¹⁹

Harris may be attempting here to distance herself from the homophobic strains in black literary and political culture that used Baldwin’s homosexuality against him as a “race man.” She may also be trying to dispel belief in a simplistic, stereotypical brand of gay male misogyny, one that I certainly am not seeking to reestablish. But she draws back when I think we must push on toward interpretations that consider Baldwin’s “life-style.” From the distance of today, it feels intellectually unrewarding that Harris avoids precisely the
question that was on the minds of attendees at “practically all” of her lectures on the book. The women in the audience, from Harris’s report, were already making connections between themselves and Baldwin the man, and they appear interested to know how and why a black gay man represented women and female eroticism as he did. I would venture that these women’s interest stemmed from their need to articulate the relationship between black/gay women and black/gay men and between feminism and the raced, patriarchal currents of gay male literature. In a telling observation that points toward the primacy of male eroticism in Baldwin, Harris writes that “[i]f a male must engage in a heterosexual relationship, then perhaps that in which [Just Above My Head’s] Hall is engaged with Ruth is most acceptable to him and to Baldwin. As we have seen earlier, for Baldwin, the bisexual males who engage in homosexual relationships perhaps have the most acceptable world.”

If Harris is correct about the privileged place of male bisexuality in Baldwin’s queer creative worldview, then it seems fair to suggest that the author’s male-inflected erotic imagination actively proscribes representations of lesbians. Lesbians lost interest by virtue of their distance from “the most acceptable” erotic relations, those between men. We can now begin to define artistic self-interest beyond material conditions to include the eroticism that accords to one’s queer specificity and that disconnects one from another’s erotic specificity. In this instance, the queer imaginative paradox takes the shape of the cultural dilemma created out of this tension between gay men’s affinity toward lesbians as queers and the libidinal impulse away from queers who are lesbians, framed against the backdrop of patriarchy and race that informs both that affinity and that disinterest. Are gay male writers interested in lesbians, enough to write about them?

Baldwin might have, precisely through his dialogues with some of the most intelligent and creative lesbians of the late twentieth century, shown a writerly interest in representing lesbians in his fiction. One might expect Baldwin’s love object Norman Mailer, by way of contrast, not to have budged much from his stalwart masculinism in his 1971 town hall debate with feminists Germaine Greer, Diana Trilling, Jacqueline Ceballos, and Jill Johnston, as, in fact, he did not. One expects something different from Baldwin in his interactions with feminist lesbians. But Baldwin’s queer imagination in these cases belies his own brand of masculinism, one that tries to account for women within his worldview while nevertheless erasing lesbian existence in his fiction. We might then revise Harris’s comment that “bisexual males who engage in homosexual relationships perhaps have the most acceptable
world,” to suggest that while Baldwin’s black gay male erotic uses the denominators of race and queerness to make engagements with lesbians possible, it nevertheless draws on the privileges of sexism in a way that enables the author to turn his attention more fully to writing about intimacies among men. Though I will explore the irrationalities of that proscription shortly, it would seem at first blush that in Baldwin’s queer imagination lesbians don’t exist for reasons.

CONVERSATION WITH AUDRE LORDE

Baldwin’s 1984 conversation with Audre Lorde at Hampshire College, a portion of which was published in Essence magazine, demonstrates the odd boundedness of his sprawling queer imagination with regard to lesbian representation. The printed excerpt, titled “Revolutionary Hope,” highlights the attempt by Baldwin and Lorde, who were meeting for the first time, to negotiate the terrain of gender difference between black men and black women against the larger backdrop of American racism. Throughout the piece, there are many gestures of agreement born out of a shared sense of urgency and predicated on the hope for a revolution that, both speakers realize, is anything but assured. Lorde and Baldwin also mirror each other in their arguments that women’s and men’s experiences are different. Lorde argues that black women not only have been denied the America dream but have not even been written into the American nightmare. “Even worse than the nightmare is the blank,” Lorde says, “[a]nd Black women are the blank. . . . Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out.” Baldwin, for his part, insists that the black man has a special signification or status in terms of racial and gender oppression. Rather than a blank, the black man is a marked man, a target of the state: “A Black man has a prick, they hack it off. A Black man is a nigger when he tries to be a model for his children and he tries to protect his women.”

The speakers’ agreement about gender as difference quickly produces, however, a recurring tension in the conversation about where the revolution indicated in the title needs to occur. Baldwin and Lorde diverge when they try, as Baldwin says they must, “to locate where the danger is.” He orients the root of the oppression—and thus the danger—in the white Western world. Baldwin’s macroscopic view, however, becomes a skewed optic that, by privileging the danger for black men, re-creates black women as the blank
to which Lorde referred. Time and again, Baldwin reiterates a version of his question to Lorde: “But don’t you realize that in this republic the only real crime is to be a Black man?” Lorde denies that formulation of oppression, arguing, “No, I don’t realize that. I realize the only crime is to be Black, and that includes me too.”

Lorde locates the danger not only across racial difference but also across gender difference, noting that black men and black women are both vulnerable but differently so. While she claims that “the boot is on both our necks,” Lorde argues that black women’s blood is flowing at the hands of black men. But “[m]y blood will not wash out your horror,” she insists. In predicting the inevitability of black women “cleaving your head open with axes,” Lorde warns that black men and boys must address their misogyny if a full-out intra-race gender war is to be avoided. In response, Baldwin accuses Lorde of “blaming the Black man for the trap he’s in,” insisting that though his violent actions toward black women are his “responsibility,” they are not his “fault.” “[I]t’s not him who is my enemy,” Baldwin contends, “even when he beats up his grandmother. His grandmother has got to know.”

While Baldwin seems to take Lorde’s point about the potential for mutual destruction between black men and women, he cannot but see the black man (including himself) as the protector of “his” women and children, even when he violently transfers his pain onto their bodies.

We could argue, initially, that Baldwin is an odd spokesman for the black male protector of women, but the construction offers more than a passing metaphorical utility. Baldwin was a deeply devoted family man, helping to raise, care for, and protect his eight younger siblings before his expatriation and throughout his life. Moreover, he does not derive a cheap vicariousness from his use of that positioning, for he implies that all black men share a responsibility and a burden in that their very manhood is staked on a necessary relation of gender asymmetry with black women, a necessity created out of the racial power asymmetries that define their relationship to white men. For Baldwin, to be a black man is to (have to) protect black women from whiteness and especially from white men—but not from black men.

Critics have taken Baldwin to task for his commitment to this perspective. Dwight McBride rejects “[t]he logic implied by such thinking [for it] suggests that because whites constitute a hegemonic racial block in American society that oppresses black and other people of color, blacks can never be held wholly accountable for their own sociopolitical transgressions.” Further, he critiques the ways that “the black community” often becomes an exclusionary rhetorical-political device, meant, ironically, to reflect, cre-
ate, and protect a comprehensive coherence. Absent from such narrow constructions of “black community” is any reference to or recognition of black lesbians and gay men. McBride’s deeper critique of black queers’ corrective project of making themselves undeniably present within “the black community” is that they—and he cites Baldwin specifically—“claim the category of racial authenticity” and thus fail to indict the ideological categories of race. In the case of Baldwin, we must, characteristically, split hairs. On the one hand, he does reinsert black queers into black community, but on the other hand, this is true only for black queer men. Black lesbians do not exist in his cultural imaginary. Bizarrely, black gay men are reintroduced into black community by taking on the rhetorically powerful role, adopted time and again by Baldwin, of protector of black women. Thus, even though Baldwin frequently does critique racial categories, he nevertheless tends to draw readily on masculinist black male privilege, thereby reflecting a specifically black gay male masculinism. Reinscribing hierarchized binaries of sex, Baldwin permits black gay men like himself to “step up” into the empowered role of protector/defender while black women—more pointedly, black lesbians and all black women on what Adrienne Rich identifies as the lesbian continuum of women-identified women—“step down” into the role of that which is to be protected/defended. This leaves no space for imagining either that black women might need to be protected from black men or that they might prefer to and be able to protect themselves and each other.

Rather than argue for the obviousness of the contradictions of the black man’s trap—in other words, rather than argue that Baldwin might have more readily adopted Lorde’s perspective of the ways gender and race oppression doubles down, in particular ways, on black women as well as black men—I want to explore the reason that Baldwin is nearly blinded to those contradictions. While Baldwin’s possessive pronouncements about “his woman” may be partly a power play left over from his desire to occupy a more central role in the often masculinist Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, I think they point at least equally to the heterocentrism that is one of the inevitable results of a system of white patriarchal oppression. In Baldwin’s case, the gay black man, like the straight black man, negotiate the demands of that system by both rejecting its racism and adopting its patriarchal imperative of compulsory heterosexuality, in word if not always in deed. In this trap, black women must not only be protected, but they must first be made “protectable.” For a man to reject racism might seem to require the necessary erasure of unprotectable women, such as Lorde, whose message to Baldwin
was that she did not need the kind of protection he insisted on offering. The failure in Baldwin’s epigraph to this chapter is that he seems never to have understood how to deal with Lorde, “how to deal with [this] black girl whom you knew you couldn’t protect.” That is, in his fiction, Baldwin may have needed to create protectable women, even if he was not “temperamentally” fit to “protect” them in his life.

Absent in Baldwin’s analytic, the blank that his analytic re-creates, is the presence that is literally present in front of him: the black lesbian. Near the end of the Essence piece, Lorde places the fact of lesbian existence directly in Baldwin’s line of sight, replacing the male-female protective dyad with a picture of the lesbian couple that exists outside his field of vision. She suggests to Baldwin a model in which black women exist as the responsibility not of black men but of themselves and of each other. But this is to no avail. Though she literally embodies that absent presence, Lorde represents the unthinkable for Baldwin, someone outside of erotic relationship with black men and outside the reach of their heteronormative brand of protection.

DIALOGUE WITH NIKKI GIOVANNI

Baldwin’s conversation with Lorde echoes, in many respects, his earlier discussion with poet Nikki Giovanni, published in 1973 as James Baldwin/ Nikki Giovanni: A Dialogue. While Giovanni was not out as queer in the same way Lorde was, she nevertheless helps to demonstrate Baldwin’s paradoxical inability to imagine that which he directly engages. In the dialogue with Giovanni, Baldwin had already articulated the vision he would share with Lorde, that of a world in which the black man is the ever-degraded yet necessary center. He tells Giovanni that

the situation of the black male is a microcosm of the situation of the Christian world. The price of being a black man in America—the price the black male has had to pay, is expected to pay, and which he has to outwit—is his sex. You know, a black man is forbidden by definition, since he’s black, to assume the roles, burdens, duties and joys of being a man. In the same way that my child produced from your body did not belong to me but to the master and could be sold at any moment. This erodes a man’s sexuality, and when you erode a man’s sexuality you destroy his ability to love anyone, despite the fact that sex and love are not
the same thing. When a man’s sexuality is gone, his possibility, his hope, of loving is also gone.32

What Baldwin does not and, I think, cannot imagine in his genealogy of black male sexual erosion is black female sexuality. The question of how “his” child came to be “produced” from the black woman’s body seems to have little to do with her sex, her relationship to it, or her sexuality. Rather, the black man’s innate ownership of the child and of the black woman’s body that bears the child operates as the pressure point for Baldwin, the point of his own unique violation. At stake for Baldwin in the Christian drama is, most fundamentally, a proprietary black male sexuality, addressed in my discussion of “The Rockpile” in chapter 4 and here placed by Baldwin at the center of the Christian world’s lovelessness. Both the price the black woman pays with her sex and who demands that price go unnamed.

Responding to Baldwin’s description of how his father was made to be a “nigger” by white power, Giovanni pivots, as Lorde does, to gender disparities. She admits, “I really don’t understand it. I don’t understand how a black man can be nothing in the streets and so fearful in his home, how he can be brutalized by some white person somewhere and then come home and treat me or Mother the same way that he was being treated.”33 For Baldwin, however, the mistreatment of black women by black men provides commentary not primarily on black men’s relationship with black women but on black men’s situation vis-à-vis the racial disparity with white men. When Baldwin insists to Giovanni, as he will go on to do in his conversation with Lorde, that the black man is “not mistreating you” (my emphasis), he erases, in a single motion, the reality of black and lesbian women who see things differently. This move occurs again after Baldwin, once more claiming Giovanni as “my wife or my woman,” argues that if he is not allowed to be a man and take responsible for his own home, “it doesn’t make any difference what you may think of me.”34

Having already declared that “I’m not dealing with that,”35 Giovanni pushes back again. Linking her resistance to the way “I’ve structured my life,”36 she attempts to articulate (and here the meanings and motives of Baldwin’s interruptions become most interesting) a lesbian feminist critique, even as she works with the heterosexual examples on which Baldwin relies.37 “It does indeed make a difference what I think about it,” she insists.38 I believe she then attempts to explain her “lack” of understanding of the brutalizing black man with reference to her own socio-sexual positioning
as a lesbian mother: “I mean, you take somebody like me. I’m not married, right? . . . I couldn’t play my mother. . . . I just couldn’t deal with her role. I would say, No, no, no, this won’t work.” Baldwin misses her meaning, however, making the purely historical argument that “since your mother played that role you haven’t got to.” In this vein, Baldwin implies that Giovanni “underestimate[s] the price paid for us,” not realizing that her vision of gender equality might stem from the centrality of her sexuality in her life, even though he clearly conceives of black male sexuality as “the center” of his own life.

Undeniably, this exchange occurs at an intersection fraught with complicated power dynamics, the most obvious of which are raced and gendered. Moreover, an underlying queer paradox helps to structure this confrontation. Apparently, a black man is here arguing that he cannot be blamed for brutalizing a black woman because his (implicitly hetero) sexuality matters so much—“when you erode a man’s sexuality you destroy his ability to love anyone.” In actual fact, however, a black gay man is here arguing that he cannot be blamed for brutalizing a black lesbian woman, as though their sexualities did not matter. In other words, for Baldwin’s logic to make sense, the relationship between the black gay man and the black lesbian must be erased, made into a distorted copy of a heteronormative patriarchal black paradigm, which itself has already been made into a distorted copy of a heteronormative patriarchal white paradigm. Baldwin fails to recognize that Giovanni, as a black lesbian single mother, has structured her life so as not to have to deal with the black (gay) man’s brutalization of her and hers. In other words, rather than using the specificity of his own black gay male positioning to reassess and rearticulate his relationship both to the racist, heterosexist larger culture and to the person sitting in front of him—someone, I should add, who explicitly offers him a model of how to do just that from a black lesbian perspective—Baldwin dislocates himself in such a way as to reveal his black gay male privilege but not reflect on it.

Perhaps Baldwin’s most interesting performance as race man in his dialogue with Giovanni comes by way of an anecdote he tells of almost getting married at the age of twenty-two. The story comes at a point in the discussion at which Baldwin is explaining the black man’s misogynistic responses to his trap as irrational (though completely understandable) and thus undermining (while also agreeing with) Giovanni’s “rational” argument that he should treat her better. The “several reasons” Baldwin gives for not having married are fascinating. He explains,
I threw my wedding rings in the river and split, decided I would have to leave. I didn't get married partly because I had no future. . . . I couldn't keep a job because I couldn't stand the people I was working for. Nobody could call me a nigger. So I split to Paris. Now I loved that girl and I wanted children, but I already had eight and they were all starving. And from my point of view it would have been an act of the most criminal irresponsibility to bring another mouth into the world which I could not feed.41

Giovanni tries to draw a distinction by suggesting that “those weren't your children.” She continues, with subtlety, “One cannot, and I'm not knocking your life, but one cannot be responsible for what one has not produced.” Baldwin can only offer, “I said we are not being rational.”

Though Giovanni's comments might be read as letting Baldwin off the hook by shifting the burden of fatherly responsibility away from him, another meaning exists as well. In not “knocking” Baldwin's life, she must also mean his decision to run to Paris, to remain single, to love men. But by virtue of that decision and that life, Giovanni also refuses to allow Baldwin to step into the role of the straight black father or husband. She will not grant him the responsibility that he will nevertheless attempt to use against her when he cannot achieve it. Further, she will not allow him to speak, in this moment, as the kind of race man he is not. As I have suggested, Baldwin was very much a family man, and there is a great deal of depth in his simple declaration that “those are my brothers and sisters.”42 I do not believe that Giovanni is making light of those connections. Instead, I hear her speaking as a single queer mother, a place of responsibility that, in fact, Baldwin will not grant her even as he accesses it as a gay man. If she is dismissive of Baldwin's claims here, it might well be precisely because of the matrix of irrationalities created by Baldwin's story of a marital near miss. He first recounts his very real experiences of having racist employers, a story told at length in Notes of a Native Son, and then introduces his own imagined starving child and his starving brothers and sisters as reasons for not getting married, despite the fact that, he tells Giovanni, he “loved that girl.” As “his” children become the reason for him not getting married, Baldwin becomes the resolutely single black father. When Giovanni pleads for rational expectations of the black man, she is perhaps making two pleas at once: for straight black men to be men without misogyny and for gay black men to be men without wives (or the children that take their protected place), akin to the way that
she is a black lesbian without a husband. The deeper critique of black masculinity that is imminent in the feminist analysis offered by Giovanni and Lorde is a lesbian critique of black gay male privilege and, more broadly, of what I call the “gay male conundrum.”

THE GAY MALE CONUNDRUM

The gay male conundrum offers a perhaps prototypical instance of queer paradoxicality. It is created by the simultaneous positioning of gay men as queer with respect to dominant patriarchal culture, insofar as homosexuality is subordinated to the normative ideals of masculinist heterosexuality, and their positioning as normative with respect to queer subculture, insofar as (queer) women are subordinated to the cultural ideals of personhood, that is, (queer) men. As seen above, race can be deployed within the gay male conundrum in many conflicting and complementary ways. Baldwin’s unquestionable concern for black women, for example, emerges most often through the construction of himself as a black man. He thus speaks of “his woman” in ways that appeal generally to the larger heterosexist patriarchal American culture and that simultaneously ingratiate him with members of the Black Power and Black Nationalism movements whose own brand of protective masculinism responded to the racist imperatives of that dominant white culture. This strategy places him in the seat of queer paradox that I am here calling the “gay male conundrum” and, more specifically, the “black gay male conundrum.”

Lorraine Hansberry, Baldwin’s dear friend and “sister,” predicted the work of Giovanni and Lorde in their efforts to speak, however directly or obliquely, to the vexed positioning of the black gay male conundrum. Though there is no comparable published dialogue between Hansberry and Baldwin, the outlines of a such a dynamic can be reconstructed beginning with two letters Hansberry wrote to the Ladder (a publication of lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis), in May and August of 1957. Hansberry begins her May letter by reflecting her understanding that the lesbian publication to which she was contributing was necessarily feminist. “Our problems, our experiences as women are profoundly unique as compared to the other half of the human race,” she writes. Her gratitude for the Ladder (she opens her letter with “I’m glad as heck that you exist”) thus comes from a shared experience that seeks to interject women’s perspectives into urgent
women-centered conversations. Yet at the same time that she argues that women need their own publications, Hansberry is also broadly integrationist. She first eschews “any strict separatist notions, homo or hetero” of women’s organization. Then, having parenthetically stated, “(I am a Negro),” she advocates for the integration of lesbians into mainstream women’s behavior and dress based on her “cultural experience” of assimilating as a black women into white cultural codes. She is clear to lay the blame for the “discomfort” caused by butch lesbians and the “ill-dressed or illiterate Negro” at the feet of the heterosexist and racist majority, but she nevertheless concedes “for the moment” that when even “one’s most enlightened (to use a hopeful term) heterosexual friends” remain “disturb[ed]” by lesbian gender nonconformity, assimilation into the norm is perhaps required.

Crucially, as part of her integrationist vision, the twenty-seven-year-old Hansberry foresees that lesbians would not only need to speak as women and as feminists to each other but would need to speak back to and confront men as well. Near the end of her longer, August letter, Hansberry turns more fully to the feminist issue of confronting “male dominated culture” and, I argue, the lesbian issue of confronting the gay male conundrum. Though she does not explicitly mention it here, she has already positioned race as intersectional with gender. In the following passages, Hansberry again works from the baseline of women’s experience and then specifies at the level of homosexuality. She first writes, “I think it is about time that equipped women began to take on some of the ethical questions which a male dominated culture has produced and dissect and analyze them quite to pieces in a serious fashion. It is time that ‘half the human race’ had something to say about the nature of its existence.” That feminist/lesbian critique of patriarchy generally then leads into a more pointed lesbian/feminist focus that entwines homophobia and sexism: “In this kind of work there may be women to emerge who will be able to formulate a new and possible concept that homosexual persecution and condemnation has at its roots not only social ignorance, but a philosophically active anti-feminist dogma. But that is but a kernel of a speculative embryonic idea improperly introduced here.” The “speculative embryonic idea” would find fuller formulation two decades later, to cite but one important example, in the “Black Feminist Statement” of the Combahee River Collective.

For his part, in “Lorraine Hansberry at the Summit,” Baldwin records the kind of powerful act of speaking back that Hansberry had called for and then accomplished. The remembrance details how the thirty-three-year-
old playwright stood at the vortex of the famous 1963 meeting of black and white civil rights leaders with Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Despite the clarity and eloquence of Hansberry’s remarks, Kennedy refused to hear. Baldwin writes,

The meeting ended with Lorraine standing up. She said, in response to Jerome [Smith’s] statement concerning the perpetual demolition faced every hour of every day by black men, who pay a price literally unspeakable for attempting to protect their women, their children, their homes, or their lives, “That is all true, but I am not worried about black men—who have done splendidly, it seems to me, all things considered.” Then, she paused and looked at Bobby Kennedy, who, perhaps for the first time, looked at her. “But I am very worried,” she said, “about the state of the civilization which produced that photograph of the white cop standing on that Negro woman’s neck in Birmingham.” Then, she smiled. And I am glad that she was not smiling at me.48

Baldwin positions Hansberry as transcendent. He remembers her standing, though he knows she was seated (“she towered, that child, from a sitting position”), and he attributes to her a final, withering smile, one he was happy to avoid. Baldwin believes that Hansberry was not speaking to him in that moment, that her penetrating gaze did not include him. But might it be otherwise, especially if the woman with the boot on her neck represents the absolute failure of (at least some of) the men in the room to imagine the stakes of American racism and sexism for black lesbians?

A point easily lost in a reading of Hansberry’s letters is that the men Hansberry sought to speak back to as a black lesbian feminist were, inevitably, black and gay as well as straight and white men. The critique she levels at Kennedy contains, not far from its center, a critique of black gender relations. It certainly contains a critique of Baldwin’s claim, in his interview with Lorde, that “the only real crime” in America was “to be a Black man.” Further, bubbling just under the surface of Hansberry’s August contribution to the Ladder is the largely unexamined tension created when sexist homophobia emerges as gay male ideology. While she connects the price that homosexuals (both men and women) pay as homosexuals to the costs of sexism toward women, Hansberry’s “rhetoric of intersectionality”50 compels an inquiry into the complex gender differential between gay men and lesbians and, as it pertains here, between gay men and lesbians of color.51
WHY LESBIANS?

The feature of the gay male conundrum that I am interested in here is the way that Baldwin engages with and attempts to make use of black lesbians (or, in Margaret Mead’s case, a lesbian who shares Baldwin’s devotion to the analysis of race). I suggest that Baldwin does so in deeply personal ways as a black gay man. There were inevitably professional considerations at play. The dialogue with Nikki Giovanni was motivated partly by Baldwin’s desire to stay relevant at a time when his critical and popular success had waned. His attempt to write a novel with a female protagonist in the 1974 *If Beale Street Could Talk* might be read, in this light, as a gay male writer’s “gimmick,” more self-interested than woman-centered. This sounds uncharitable, but I do not mean the term “self-interested” to identify here any singular, mercantile motivation. Undoubtedly, Baldwin was terribly concerned with matters of career and success. At a point when his literary reputation was flagging, the temptation to find a “gimmick”—the word is Baldwin’s, used to describe how a young black boy in Harlem must find something to “start him on his way”—must surely have been strong. Despite the fact that queer poet June Jordan faulted *If Beale Street Could Talk* for its unconvincing portrayals of women in her review for the *Village Voice*, for the struggling black gay male author writing in an age of black masculinism, women held a certain queer appeal.

One wonders, though, why Baldwin seemed compelled to turn to lesbians in turning to women, especially when he could not imaginatively render or feel implicated in the boot on their necks. This question helps to elucidate Baldwin’s place within the gay male conundrum, insofar as he was apparently concerned with yet inattentive to lesbians and lesbian desire. Clearly, it cannot be argued that sex was not on the speakers’ agendas in his dialogues with women. Likewise, sexuality was omnipresent, if encoded or unspoken. I would go even further: Baldwin, as a gay man, engaged with these women as lesbians, and they engaged with him as a gay man. This is nearly to say “because” they were lesbians, which would seem reasonable. But by “as lesbians” I intend a more nuanced meaning: that is, in the context of their being lesbian, or in the context of the speakers being queer. Such a context could be very useful to Baldwin, whose attempts to be a family man might have been buttressed, precisely (and not ironically) by his status as “family” in the queer context of the dialogues. A certain protectiveness by lesbians might
have been (rightly, it turns out) assumed by Baldwin, enabling him to in-
habit the guise of being their protector. Such an assumption or reliance on
his part would have been both naive and cunning, for while the women resist
his sexism, they do not fully expose its paradoxical orientation. As “the black
family man,” he cannot withstand their various critiques, but neither do they
use his homosexuality explicitly against him as part of those critiques.

In her collection of essays titled Margaret Mead Made Me Gay, noted
lesbian anthropologist Esther Newton relates the story of how she gravitat-
ed toward Mead’s work of exploring cultural difference. Having felt herself
to be different in the “nasty barnyard” of high school, Newton personalizes
the anthropological study of otherness as an endeavor that made a special
kind of sense to her. Mead, as a woman who chose women subjects (and
women lovers), became a model for the young Newton, even though, at the
time, Newton “knew nothing about Margaret Mead’s being bisexual.”

Female difference attracted Newton to Mead; unarticulated queer similarity
lay at the heart of that difference.

Mead and Baldwin met in August of 1970 for a conversation that would
be published the following year as A Rap on Race. Though the transcript
of that meeting has been celebrated and derided, the two-day discussion
at least made a certain kind of sense: a superstar anthropologist meets a
tour de force of the literary world to discuss the shared subject of much of
their thinking and writing. Yet the meeting was also a setup, a performance
arranged by an interested party (the publisher) and predicated on a set of
potentially productive (yet potentially incendiary) differences between the
two participants. An otherwise unremarkable negative review in the New
York Review of Books in December 1971 stands out for the particular clarity
with which it styles Baldwin and Mead not merely as different but, in fact,
as opposites.

Baldwin presents himself as male, black, poet, existentialist, slave, ex-
ile, ex-Christian. Mead appears as female, white, positivist, Episcopa-
lian, old American, the most famous anthropologist in America. From
the beginning they are betrayed by their respective idioms. His is stagy,
stale, full of forced rhythms, a parody of the writer’s style. Hers is preten-
tious, inflated; one feels that one is being beaten to death with a pillow.
Through most of the dialogue Margaret Mead is full of what can only
be called machismo, while Baldwin seems as nervous and respectful as a
bridegroom.
While being so clear about the speakers’ differences, what the reviewer also tries so loudly to whisper is that another difference structures the dialogue’s polarity: Mead’s lesbianism and Baldwin’s homosexuality. Mead had been linked to Ruth Benedict early in her career and, having divorced her third husband in 1950, had been living with Rhoda Metraux (both women were fellow anthropologists and collaborators) since 1955, one year before Baldwin’s literary coming-out with the publication of *Giovanni’s Room*. Mead and Metraux would live together until Mead’s death in 1978. As public or semi-public queer intellectuals, Mead, “full of what can only be called *machismo*,” becomes the butch to Baldwin’s nelly “nervous and respectful... bridegroom.” Differences abound.

But I wonder whether an unarticulated queer similarity such as the one that drew Esther Newton to Mead also drew the macho Mead and the effeminized Baldwin together around the issue of racial difference. In other words, did the very “expertise” metaphorized by the snide reviewer above nevertheless provide the logic for their discussion? Their talk is frequently exasperating and perhaps ultimately exhausting as they circle around, as a climactic moment exemplifies, the (a)symmetries of racial oppression. Baldwin insists, characteristically, that he and Mead have both been victimized in their own ways and that “we are both exiles,” he because of “the terms on which my life was offered to me in my country”57 and she “because of what you know.” For Baldwin, Mead knows something that makes her an outsider “from the mainstream of the life in this country.” The ostensible topic being race, Mead rebukes Baldwin again and again: “I am not an exile. I am absolutely not an exile. I live here and I live in Samoa and I live in New Guinea. I live everywhere on this planet that I have ever been, and I am no exile.”58 Baldwin can only respond with, “I am not at home. I am not at home.”59

Was Baldwin reaching, in this exchange, toward a queer common ground, one stabilized by the more obvious considerations of race and gender that placed him in the room with Mead? If so, that queer meeting place becomes quicksand. In his discussion with Mead as in his dealings with Hansberry, Giovanni, and Lorde, Baldwin ultimately stands alone (stubbornly? blindly? longingly?) in a place of shared queerness. But how did queer similarity—a meeting of queer imaginative minds—fail to sustain Baldwin, thereby throwing him into relief against lesbian feminism rather than in line with it? The answer I have been considering is the paradox of Baldwin’s black gay masculinism and, more generally, the gay male conundrum.

This point, that Baldwin engages Hansberry, Mead, Giovanni, and
Lorde—so different from each other—as a gay man addressing lesbians, cannot be proved. His need for queer collaboration, if it is a need, go unspoken. Neither can it be proved that Baldwin’s extended exchanges with Norman Mailer exist because Mailer was straight. Yet, to offer but one illuminating counterexample, Baldwin’s “love letter” to the famously, helplessly straight Mailer, written as an essay titled “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” clearly suggests that truth. Likewise, the gay-lesbian connection allowed for the Baldwin-lesbian dialogues to be imagined. The queer imagination created not the raison d’être for the dialogues but, rather, one important condition of their very possibility. That these conversations were “about” race and gender does not change the queer conditions that facilitated the engagements. One of the points I am trying to make in this conclusion crystallizes here: the queer imagination both enables and disables; it creates possibilities for thought even as it ruptures in the very specificity of queer need. Queerness brought these thinkers together, and queerness kept them apart in an agon of queer doing and undoing.

In her dialogue with Baldwin, Giovanni pleads for rationality about the power differentials that structure gender. Mead, in a more scientific fashion, does the same for race. I want to repeat Baldwin’s explicit response to Giovanni (and his implicit response to Mead): “I said we are not being rational.” If we are looking for a rational answer to why Baldwin does not represent lesbians in his fiction, we might theorize that absence as a vacuum created by forces of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Though Baldwin demonstrates, time and again, that he is tethered to these interwoven oppressions, I have wanted, in this conclusion and in this book, to suggest the incongruity of these limitations with the expansiveness of Baldwin’s queer imagination. If we are to explain the absence of lesbians in his fiction, we might need to explain how Baldwin could manage not to feel pinned in his own chair by Hansberry’s final smile at Bobby Kennedy. To do this, we might need to look beyond the “rational” rewards of gay male misogyny to a more paradoxical interplay of interest and disinterest. Adapting Lear’s psychoanalytic model, we might consider another explanation. Perhaps Baldwin’s twin motivations—to engage with and to disengage from lesbians—have another meaning, an irrational one. Further, perhaps it is not the discrepancy between the two actions that provide the basis for understanding Baldwin’s treatment of lesbians as irrational. Instead, perhaps Baldwin’s strategy of “doing and undoing” is not so much agonistic as dependent, integral, indivisible. The “twin” acts of speaking with and silencing lesbians may not in
fact be two; rather, they may index, without explaining, the more general paradox—a paradox that is not a pattern—of the queer imagination. Leo Bersani, who provides an epigraph to this chapter, writes in *Homo* that gay male sexuality is as prone as any other mode of sexual expression to contradictions not entirely reducible to bad social arrangements. By attributing the inevitable suffering and struggle for power between intimately related individuals to the nefarious influence of patriarchal culture, gay and lesbian activists have found a convenient if rather mean-spirited way of denying human distress. To admit that being a gay man or a lesbian involves a certain sexual specificity, and even to go so far as to wonder about the psychic structures and origins of that specificity, might implicate us in that distress by forcing us to see the gay take on what is politically unfixable in the human.60

While my argument in this conclusion primarily has exposed the “convenient” (though I hope I have made clear not always “mean-spirited”) ways Baldwin was able to deny lesbians and their distress—and I am not at all backing away from that argument—there is yet light between those explanations of Baldwin’s gay male conundrum and my sense of the man I have spent every day with for many years. This further aspect of the paradox of Baldwin is the indivisibility of his success and his failure, the paradox of his specific unfixability, which must be set alongside that which is fixable in his queer vision. Insofar as specificity provides the logic of unfixibility, the queer imagination will continue to rupture in specific, unpredictable, irrational ways. Much as we might hope for it, Baldwin’s paradox will not emerge in exactly the same form ever again. Our future work as queer theorists—the work of articulating queer paradox, of fixing what is fixable, and of facing what is not—has not yet been cut out for us.

Baldwin’s deepest artistic interests were his deepest erotic interests. Why should they not be? His eroticism is, after all, no light or easy thing. Baldwin saw it as absolutely central to American history and national identity, as the crux of the American question, because he worked from the assumption that the sexual and the racial were inseparable, because he understood the black man—made into “a walking phallic symbol”61—as the symbol of the combustible union of sex and race, and because he was himself queer. In exploring how his sexual identity as a black man shot through his national identity and was shot through by it, he was able to bring to light the homo-
erotics of that violent union as perhaps no one else has done. This is to say that Baldwin’s artistic vision was formed as and informed by a black queer imaginative capacity. That his erotic interest was specific (or what he called “personal”) is beyond criticism; that his artistic interest tracked closely with the erotic is unexceptional as well. That this connection is made within a complex dynamic of power relations, including with black and white lesbians, and that Baldwin’s writing replays those unequal power relations in the very field of queerness has been, in the more general case, the source of my fascination in this book. I have wanted to do several things: to map the queer imaginative field created and reflected in Baldwin’s fiction, to suggest that the topography of that map is rich and varied and simultaneously thin and inconsistent, and to complicate the queerness of the map’s borders by examining its expansive as well as its unpredictable, even unfixed, ruptures. Beyond the simplistic hierarchies that Baldwin worked tirelessly to dismantle, differences and differentials persist, altered yet unexpectedly resilient, in queer imaginative paradox.