It's Been Beautiful
Wald, Gayle

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In his biography of Betty Shabazz (figure 4.1), the historian Russell Rickford describes the years after the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X, during which his widow, grieving and injured by what she believed to be the many abuses of her husband’s legacy, moved with her children to the New York City suburbs and avoided socializing. Shabazz was eventually coaxed “out of her seclusion,” Rickford tells us, through the efforts of two groups of friends. One consisted of the “more established figures in Malcolm’s progressive circles,” a “crowd of writers, artists, and academics that included [James] Baldwin, Larry and Evelyn Neal, John Henrik Clarke, and John and Grace Killens.” The other was a predominantly female group that Rickford describes as “younger and saucier”: “Its members were self-made, well read, and college bred. They were artists, but they were not too artsy. They were heavy, though not as heavy as the old-guard Civil Righters or the New Left. Nor were they as ethereal as the black bourgeoisie. They were, in truth, misfits.
Stage and screen actress Novella Nelson was among them, as was poet Nikki Giovanni. At the center of the ring was Ellis Haizlip.\(^1\)

The producer of *Soul!* had, in fact, deliberately befriended Shabazz in the late 1960s, escorting her to concerts and shows in the city and encouraging her to enjoy New York nightlife notwithstanding the pressures of her public role as a widow. As a result of this friendship—which, Rickford implies, was facilitated by Haizlip’s status as a safe male companion because he was gay—Shabazz appeared on the second *Soul!* episode in September 1968 and was also featured on a February 1972 episode commemorating the seventh anniversary of her husband’s death.\(^2\) Indeed, when Shabazz shed her social reclusiveness to become part of Haizlip’s circle, she not only acquired a new set of lively and urbane friends, but she also entered into a New York social, cultural, and intellectual milieu centered on the television show. Nelson, who met Haizlip in a chance encounter in Washington Square Park, had performed on the first *Soul!* episode and was thereafter a creative anchor of the program. (A photograph from a 1972 episode [figure 4.2] shows her in the midst of an intense off-camera conversation with Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte.) The actor Anna Horsford, another member of Haizlip’s circle, recited poetry on *Soul!* and served as an associate producer; after the second season, she was also the face of the show in the opening title sequence. And Giovanni, *Soul!*’s unofficial house poet, did triple duty: she was also a consultant to Haizlip and an occasional host, conducting interviews over several seasons with Muhammad Ali, Miriam Makeba, Gladys Knight, Chester Himes, and, as I discuss below in this chapter, James Baldwin. All three women—as well as poets Jackie Early, Sonia Sanchez, and Saundra Sharp—were among the featured guests on a landmark 1971 “Salute to Black Women” episode (figure 4.3).\(^3\)

Shabazz was not alone in being exposed to this extraordinary group of young, gifted, and black New Yorkers. When Haizlip came to produce *Soul!,* Horsford recently observed, “He exposed his circle of friends to the world.”\(^4\) It was a circle that Haizlip had been cultivating since his days at Howard University, where he had come into contact with students from Africa and the Caribbean, met left-wing faculty members, kept up with (like some of his peers) *The Daily Worker,* and generally
absorbed the university’s “climate of defiance.” Leaving Howard before graduation to pursue a career in the New York theater world, Haizlip found the job discrimination against African Americans so dire that he took to sending a photo of himself in letters to prospective employers.

Denied access to Broadway, Haizlip—like other creative black people of his generation—turned to alternative venues and institutions to develop his talents. Haizlip cut his teeth at places like the Harlem YMCA, where he worked in the late 1950s as a production assistant under the brilliant and demanding Vinnette Carroll, and Equity Library Theater, a nonprofit institution on the Upper West Side where he learned to make shows on a shoestring budget—knowledge that would come in handy during his tenure in public broadcasting. Later, he honed his skills and garnered valuable experience in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East producing the touring productions of works including *Black Nativity* and *The Amen Corner*. In these and other settings, Haizlip developed an understanding of audiences for the performing arts and initiated or solidified relationships with a wide range of writers, actors, musi-
cians, dancers, and visual artists—from Baldwin, Cicely Tyson, and Alvin Ailey to the German-born Jewish visual artist Eva Hesse, with whom he briefly shared an apartment. At Equity Library Theater, he worked alongside a young white man, Patrick “Packy” McGinnis, the future operations manager of Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, home of Soul at the Center and Soul ’73. When Haizlip’s friend Christopher “Kit” Lukas, director of cultural programming at Channel 13/wndt, came calling in 1968, in need of a black TV producer for a new, Ford Foundation–funded venture, Haizlip was poised to put not only his experience but also his extended network to use. As Horsford suggests, he was able to put his talented friends on television, and to do so years—in some cases, decades—before white producers and audiences would discover them.

Although Haizlip’s path from the Deanwood neighborhood of easternmost Washington, D.C., to 275 Fifth Avenue, his longtime New York address, was unique, in other ways, his formation was unexceptional. Like Haizlip, the members of his extended circle developed their artistic, cultural, and political sensibilities in a context defined by state-sanctioned discrimination and racial segregation, as well as Cold War–era backlash against the progressivism of the 1930s popular front. Yet these limiting circumstances provided fuel for careers defined by restless political exploration and creative rebellion. From their experiences of being relegated to stereotypical roles, black artists and intellectuals shaped in this historical moment came to reject the policing of their self-expression, insisting on black self-definition as a fundamental right. (As Nelson told the black female journalist Margo Jefferson in “Different Drums,” a 1974 Newsweek profile that described her eclectic Greenwich Village cabaret act, “I’m evolving into song. But you don’t have to play one role.”) Because they had been forcefully and dismissively shut out—from prestigious white universities, commercial publishing contracts, lucrative record and movie deals, and choice stage roles—they learned to pursue their work heedless or even contemptuous of mainstream approval or recognition. (Giovanni self-published her first volumes of poetry and garnered her early audiences through black social and cultural networks.) And because they understood the rules of the commercial marketplace, they pursued their
ambitions wary of commercial incorporation, all the while insisting on their value. (Although they were limited in the compensation they could expect on public broadcasting, no one on Soul! performed for free.) From the historical perspective of this generation of artists and cultural workers, the black arts and Black Power movements did not represent a shift into radicalism but a flowering of dissident expression, the seeds of which had been planted and nurtured in the seemingly tamer era of civil rights.  

The figures who constituted Shabazz’s more established circle of friends were, in fact, among the most prominent theorists of this modern black countertradition. Baldwin, in particular, had been exploring the figure of the black misfit since his earliest published work in the 1950s. In his 1965 essay “Sweet Lorraine,” composed on the occasion of the untimely death of Lorraine Hansberry, he wrote affectingly of his grief at losing the company of a person who shared his experience of loneliness—thereby suggesting the existence of a black counterpublic sphere where being black and a misfit (in this case, black and queer and a writer) might be a source of connection and solidarity. Baldwin would return to these themes in an even more intensely personal fashion twenty years later in “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” an essay in which the mature writer looks back at the period when he left the known world of family and church to immerse himself in the interracial gay New York sexual subculture of the 1940s. Discovering that he feels freakish even among other sexual outlaws is painful and even terrifying for the young Baldwin, but it is also undeniably liberating, freeing him to fashion himself as a writer who bears privileged witness to the freakishness of U.S. society and culture.

Baldwin’s musings on the critical power of the outsider invite me in this chapter to contemplate the pleasures of Soul! as a television show that represented black diversity, nonconformity, and freakishness as the norm, part of the “changing same” of twentieth-century black misfittedness. The preeminent representative of such misfittedness was, of course, “Mr. Soul.” In an era that was generally lacking socially sanctioned avenues of cultural recognition for queer subjects, Haizlip quietly but insistently used Soul! to register the existence of gays and lesbians within the black collective. He did so, moreover, with an awareness
of the ways this would inevitably draw attention to his own gender and sexual non-normality. In minutes from a meeting of project advisors for a proposed program titled “The Sixth Period” (which eventually became the short-lived 1978 PBS classroom comedy-drama series Watch Your Mouth), the former Soul! host is noted to have observed that a black man “can be considered effeminate if he speaks very correctly.” In the course of the group’s discussion of how the character of a black male teacher in “The Sixth Period” should sound, Haizlip recalled that during his stint as Soul!’s host, “quite a few people, usually female, came up to me and said, ‘You know, we really admire the way you speak.’ And quite often males would come up and say, ‘Man, why don’t you talk some different way.’”

The Watch Your Mouth meeting notes do not speculate on why male and female viewers of Soul! may have experienced Haizlip differently or how their perceptions of class might have shaped their sense of its significance. Nor do the notes comment on the relationship between black masculine authenticity and speaking in an admirable or “correct” manner, although in some quarters, radical self-fashioning among middle-class black men in the Black Power era entailed the adoption of a “working-class” argot. Yet the story Haizlip tells is significant for establishing his awareness that some Soul! viewers associated his manner of speaking with sexual as well as class difference and, more importantly for this chapter’s purposes, for demonstrating that he was unwilling to modify his vocal performance to assuage any anxieties it might have generated. The social audibility of the effeminate black gay man, Haizlip’s story suggests, means that his sexual non-normality had a cultural and affective presence on Soul!, even if it was unspoken and unrepresented. When Haizlip introduced the topic of black homosexuality in his interviews with Soul! guests, then, he was not only defying the social compact that demanded silence around the presence of so-called sissies, faggots, and bulldaggers in black communities, but also channeling and amplifying that which was always already audible in his spoken performance.

An ecumenical progressive in an era of proliferating political factions and -isms, the producer fashioned Soul! as a big-tent political stage, a program that extended an equally warm welcome to revolutionary na-
tionalists (Kathleen Cleaver), former Garveyites (Queen Mother Audley Moore), neo–civil rights leaders (Jessie Jackson and Shirley Chisholm), Black Power entrepreneurs (Tony Brown of the *Black Journal*), and cultural nationalists (Amiri Baraka and Neal) in the studio between 1970 and 1973. It was indeed one of the few programs on national television in the early 1970s to figure black radicals and black radical thought as worthy of serious engagement rather than blanket condemnation, caricature, or ridicule. The show constituted a stern rebuttal of television productions that painted political expression of Black Power in crude strokes, or capitalized on differences and disagreements among leaders to create an impression of collective disarray. *Soul!* implicitly called to account news programs that profited from the spectacle of brash young activists only to represent them as dangers to democratic civility and destroyers of mainstream goodwill toward civil rights. If mainstream programming portrayed the diverse political energies of the black Left within a melodramatic scenario that pitted the good protestor against the bad troublemaker, the deserving citizen against the misguided agitator, and the profane provocateur against the respectable artist, *Soul!* countered with a representation that refused to identify heroes and villains but looked instead for the good in different aesthetics, strategies, and ideologies. If the generational narrative preferred by most TV producers was complicit with the erasure of black women in black arts and Black Power, *Soul!* beat back against this characterization of black political culture as an arena of Oedipal strife, bringing women more fully into the conversation.

*Soul!* made visible the tensions and debates in nationalist discourses, in the process testing viewers’ own identifications with and affective investments in nationalist utopias. As the episodes I describe in detail below vividly demonstrate, although nationalism on *Soul!* was vigorously interrogated, particularly for its subordination of women and demonization or suppression of homosexuality, it was also consistently represented as a historically valid framework within which a wide variety of black actors (including black women and black queers) thought and worked, rather than an inherently corrosive ideology external to black history and experience. And although the program probed the limitations of masculinist paradigms of the black experience, it did so
while acknowledging the tremendous affective appeal of nationalism’s narratives of male dignity and suppressed black genius (going all the way back to Loretta Long’s and Barbara Ann Teer’s appreciation for the Last Poets’ “Lady Black” on the fifth episode of *Soul!*, discussed in chapter 2). Indeed, one of *Soul!’s* most significant aesthetic hallmarks was its extraordinary sensitivity to radical subjects and viewpoints that were not only excoriated, mocked, and misconstrued within mainstream *TV* representations but were also regarded skeptically within black mainstream representation and some quarters of the black Left. The best example of this may be the two *Soul!* episodes featuring Louis Farrakhan, who was greeted warmly by the show’s host notwithstanding lingering suspicions on the part of many Black Muslims (including members of the Shabazz family) of his complicity in the assassination of his former mentor, Malcolm X.

Most of the talk segments with black political figures on *Soul!* were brief, complementing the music and other arts performances that were the heart of the program. But some episodes—including a special two-episode dialogue between Baldwin and Giovanni in December 1971 and hour-long specials devoted to Farrakhan and Baraka, both in fall 1972—gave viewers chances to listen in on extended, in-depth exchanges where what I am calling the misfit energies of the Black Power era were manifest. In the “Baldwin and Giovanni” episodes, the two writers converse in highly personal terms about intimacy between black men and black women, even as they self-consciously enact such intimacy as a weird or misfit couple. Their impassioned dialogue, which reaches an emotional climax in Giovanni’s trenchant feminist critique of Baldwin, sets the stage for “Farrakhan the Minister” and “Baraka, the Artist,” *Soul!* episodes in which Haizlip openly questions the gender and sexual politics of the Nation of Islam (*NOI*) and cultural nationalists—which leads to moments of tension and irresolution, but also moments that theatricalize the ongoing quest for brotherhood in the face of difference. It is to these episodes, which bring to the surface the disruptive but also richly generative presence of the misfit within the black collective, that I turn before returning, in the conclusion of the chapter, to the question of the archives and to *Soul!’s* own misfittedness within even revisionist histories of the soul era.
“Baldwin and Giovanni,” which aired in two consecutive episodes, is a conversation between two writers, one renowned for his groundbreaking fiction and essays, the other an up-and-coming poet and memoirist. Although Rickford accurately identifies Baldwin as an established figure, the most prominent literary spokesman of the civil rights movement was also a target for many younger 1960s radicals. *Soul on Ice*, the 1968 memoir by the Black Panthers’ Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, is but the most infamous example of the homophobia marshaled by some on the black Left to caricature Baldwin’s philosophical ambivalence about nationalism, fueled by his long-standing commitment to civil rights interracialism. Not all of Baldwin’s critics would indulge in the violent rhetorical excesses of Cleaver, who accused “Negro homosexuals” of being “outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man.” Yet by the late 1960s, “Baldwin-bashing,” often with a gay-bashing component, had become “almost a rite of initiation” within black nationalist circles, a means by which male intellectuals staged their own claims to ideological correctness and race and gender authenticity.

Although Giovanni ardently disassociated herself from such homophobic rhetoric and distanced herself from the aesthetics of cultural nationalists, she was nevertheless popularly identified as a poet in the black arts movement and enjoyed enormous acclaim among the ordinary readers whom the movement held in esteem. Her first volumes, *Black Feeling Black Talk* and *Black Judgement* (sometimes written as “Judgment”), both from 1968, had sold remarkably well, and her 1971 album *Truth Is on Its Way*, a poetry and gospel mash-up featuring Giovanni with the New York Community Choir, had been such a smash that it had crossed over to the pop charts. (Her friend and admirer Ellis Haizlip contributed liner notes.) As a highly popular poet, Giovanni had her share of detractors. Some accused her of selling out, others of untoward self-promotion that revealed a greater concern with her individual stature than with the well-being of black writers as a whole. In her unflattering portrait in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Michele Wallace would somewhat dismissively refer to Giovanni as the movement’s “reigning poetess” and, more unkindly, call her a “black Rod McKuen.” Wallace would even go so far as to accuse
Giovanni of recklessly encouraging other young black women to follow her example of giving birth out of wedlock. Yet as Virginia Fowler, Giovanni’s literary biographer, points out, the very qualities that could make Giovanni seem “counter-revolutionary”—her interest in individual self-expression, her “ego tripping” (to cite the title of a well-known poem), and her aggressive pursuit of an audience—also rendered her an unorthodox figure, a woman who resisted demands that she defer creatively as well as socially to her male counterparts.

The complex dynamic of misfittedness and celebrity in both writers’ personas adds a layer of complexity to the “Baldwin and Giovanni” episodes. Edited in New York but filmed in a drab London studio that was decorated with two chairs and a coffee table arrayed with drinks, ashtrays, and microphones, the episodes begin with the twenty-eight-year-old poet deferentially informing the author of “Everybody’s Protest Novel” that she first read his groundbreaking critique of Richard Wright as a precocious first grader, and with Baldwin—a bit uncomfortable at being treated as an elder before his fiftieth birthday—commenting that he is “very proud” of her and her youthful cohort for what they have achieved in the black freedom struggle. About fifteen minutes in, however, their dialogue becomes less predictable and more combustible, as the axis of difference shifts from age to age and gender. The spark is Baldwin’s reflections on the plight of black men, which come up as he attempts to narrate his intellectual and political formation as the oldest child in a large and poor family headed by his violent and domineering stepfather. The key to grasping the condition of black Americans, Baldwin argues, lies in understanding men such as David Baldwin, who endured multiple humiliations in the workplace so he could be a “man” in his family. With the camera showing the tip of his cigarette burning to ash, Baldwin—attired in a black shirt and black pants and wearing bold silver jewelry—holds forth passionately about the “spiritual disaster” of his stepfather’s life, crediting the black freedom movement with empowering a generation of black men to resist the sort of experiences that had destroyed him.

It is Baldwin’s lengthiest and most fervent comment in their dialogue to that point, yet Giovanni, seen in a close-up reaction shot as he talks (figure 4.4), appears more piqued than sympathetic. Leaning in from
her chair, she challenges Baldwin about being more concerned with the oppression of black men than that of black women and accuses him of “rationalizing” black women’s subordination in the quest for black male affirmation. Turning to her own experience, Giovanni notes that her decision not to marry the father of her young son sprang from a wish to avoid replaying the role of her own mother, who had been locked in an unequal domestic arrangement. When Baldwin (figures 4.5–4.8) counters that young women of Giovanni’s generation no longer have to be their mothers—just as Baldwin, it is assumed, does not have to be his stepfather and toil to fit a masculine ideal—Giovanni asserts that although nationalism may have benefited black men, it has not redressed gendered imbalances of power within black heterosexuality: “I have seen how the community, and even today in 1971, even today there are divisions based on those same kinds of problems, so that the black men say, ‘In order for me to be a man, you walk ten paces behind me.’ It means nothing. I can walk ten paces behind a dog. It means nothing to me, but if that’s what he needs, I’ll never get far enough behind him for him to be a man. I’ll never walk that slowly.” Granting
the validity of Giovanni’s experience, yet claiming the authority (which she has granted him) of someone who has lived longer and “seen it all,” Baldwin reassures her that Black Power is only the most recent expression of black resistance in an ongoing and incomplete struggle. “What’s valuable will remain,” he says. “The rest will go.”

Although their dialogue ranges over other issues, including the black church and the responsibility of the black writer, the critique of nationalism’s recuperation of patriarchal gender relations hovers over it as a point of simultaneous agreement and contention. Both use their own families as templates for understanding the struggles of the collective, or the national family. When Baldwin counteridentifies with the injured masculinity of his stepfather, Giovanni counteridentifies with her mother, who traded away social agency for the sake of traditional domesticity. Remarkably, at various points over the course of the two episodes, they dramatize these multilayered differences in the form of a lover’s quarrel, with Baldwin and Giovanni portraying a black couple who try to work out private differences that stand in for larger, public debates.23

These moments are marked not only by a physical closeness between the two speakers, who lean in toward one another, but also by a grammatical intimacy, as they shift into personalized modes of address. For example, when Baldwin returns to an earlier point he made about the difficulty, for black men, of playing the social role of “provider” within their families, Giovanni responds in the voice of a woman addressing her partner. “I demand that you be a man,” she tells Baldwin, “and I don’t think that’s asking too much, because if I wanted a provision, I would get a camper . . . an Army surplus kit. I need a man.” As the camera focuses on Baldwin, who regards her intently and with a markedly sad expression—perhaps because her performance challenges him to channel his own abused and abusive father—she adds, with extreme tenderness: “Sometimes you’re not able to feed your family, sometimes you’re not able to clothe your family, but do you then also deprive them of your manhood and of the input that a man has?” At one point while Baldwin is talking, a reaction shot shows Giovanni looking down at her hands, a gesture that embodies the resignation of a woman who has failed to make her lover understand her. At another point, in response
to Giovanni’s entreaty that Baldwin “fake it with me . . . for ten years, so we can get a child on his feet,” he replies sadly, “If I love you I can’t lie to you.” To which Giovanni responds, with a small smile, “Of course you can lie to me. And you will . . . What Billie Holiday sang: ‘Hush now, don’t explain.’”

To tease out the complexity of this fractured and nonlinear exchange, culminating here in Giovanni’s citation of the celebrated Holiday song—in which her lyrical persona arguably concedes power for love—would require more space than is available here. Much of what I have excerpted here from the televised conversation, moreover, was edited out of Baldwin and Giovanni’s published Dialogue. Yet Giovanni provides a succinct metacommentary on their conversation. “It looks like a black man can’t make it with a black woman,” she says to Baldwin regretfully, late in the first episode. “If somebody looks at the two of us, man, we’re the weirdest looking people on earth, ’cause you want your way and I want my way. But we’re saying the same thing. And that’s sort of a shame.”

Giovanni’s suggestion that she and Baldwin are “the weirdest looking people on earth” is striking, not only because it inserts the concept of weirdness into their dialogue, but also because it associates weirdness with heterosexual intimacy that labors under the weight of political tensions between the nationalist project of shoring up black masculinity and black women’s demands for agency and equality. Indeed, although the 1965 U.S. government report The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (popularly known as the Moynihan Report) and its discourse of black social pathology remains beneath mention for both writers, Giovanni’s observation articulates an incipient black feminist analysis that includes white supremacy, capitalism, and black patriarchal masculinity in its purview. Their performance, in other words, anticipates not only Baldwin’s “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” essay (for drawing attention to the freakishness of lovers who cannot love each other) but also, and more importantly, black feminist analysis that would come to fuller visibility in the late 1970s and 1980s in the work of women such as Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and the members of the Combahee River Collective.24 In fact, neither writer seems to have the language in this moment to respond to Giovanni’s
insights about the “weirdness” of a couple who profess to love each other and who yet envision so differently the mechanisms for fulfilling their mutual desire for intimacy. Here is where the staging of their conversation in a makeshift studio resembling a spartan domestic space (or perhaps a hotel room) becomes important, as do the nonverbal signifiers of their shared affection, anguish, and frustration: from the tilting of their heads to the inhalation of their cigarettes.

In thus dramatizing—at the register of its spectacle as well as its content—a conversation between a real couple, the “Baldwin and Giovanni” episodes stage a performance of black heterosexual intimacy that was glaringly absent on commercial television in the early 1970s. Before the bickering but affectionate George and Louise Jefferson and Good Times’s James and Florida Evans came to embody black married life on American TV, the most popular black TV families—those of Diahann Carroll’s Julia or Redd Foxx’s Fred Sanford—were conspicuously devoid of intact couples; the lead characters of both Julia and Sanford and Son had dead spouses. Riffing on famous TV couples, we might indeed imagine “Baldwin and Giovanni” as the title of a post–civil rights black satire of the domestic sitcom, in which a dueling but well-matched queer couple discuss the writer’s life, the role of the black artist, the enticements and pitfalls of nationalism, the ethics of love, and the challenges of black intimacy. (If this were not enough, “Baldwin and Giovanni” echoes the title of Baldwin’s 1958 novel, whose protagonist David has an affair with an Italian man named Giovanni.25)

However, Baldwin and Giovanni’s dramatization of a couple is predicated on the unspoken fact of Baldwin’s homosexuality, which saturates their discussion—both in the knowledge that audiences may have brought to the episodes and in Baldwin’s body language and vocal performance, which is studded with “my dears” and “sweethearts” that read both as gestures of (potentially patronizing) tenderness for Giovanni and verbal signifiers of Baldwin’s queerness. Homosexuality, or the existence of black homosexuals, comes up only at the very end of their televised conversation, when Giovanni is critiquing the uses of categories—“that junkie hype, that war hype, that whole homosexual hype”—to fashion some people as “better than others.” “Do you know what I mean?” she queries Baldwin, who rolls his eyes, and answers,
significantly, “Do I not . . . People invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people an identity. Cats who invent themselves as straight invent faggots so they can sleep with them, [performing an ‘effeminate’ male voice] without becoming a faggot themselves . . . [resuming his ‘normal’ voice] somehow.”

Yet beyond this assertion, Baldwin is not merely silent on the issue of sexual misfittedness in his dialogue with Giovanni, but he works to ensure that their discussion does not challenge the reproductive, heterosexual norm of his stepfather’s violent household. Beginning with the example of David Baldwin as a man who shouldered the responsibility of feeding nine children, James Baldwin repeatedly uses the figure of the child to imagine the future of black people in the United States. At one point, he confides to Giovanni that before he left the country to live the life of an exile, he had been involved with a woman whom he wanted to marry and have children with, but whom he left because of the looming negative example of David Baldwin’s life. In so doing, he implies that his 1948 decision to leave his girlfriend and his native country was fueled primarily by the fear of not being able to play the role of a male provider, not by ambivalence about heterosexuality (as the later “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood” essay will indicate). Audiences are thus left to presume that racism alone, not racism in concert with homophobia and a desire to explore alternatives to heterosexuality, was the determining factor in Baldwin’s self-exile.

The silence around homosexuality in “Baldwin and Giovanni” contrasts with its prominence as a topic of conversation in “Farrakhan the Minister,” which aired in late October 1972. The NOI spokesman and spiritual leader of Harlem’s Muhammad Mosque No. 7 had appeared on Soul! before, in a May 1971 episode that included Mongo Santamaría (in his second turn as a guest) and the Delfonics (some of whose members would later convert and receive their X’s). But “Farrakhan the Minister” devoted its entire hour to Elijah Muhammad’s second in command, receiving him with a respect bordering on reverence. Such cordiality was all the more notable given the tenuous position of the NOI in black political culture at the time. Although Farrakhan was invited to partici-
pate in such landmark events as the 1970 Congress of African Peoples conference in Atlanta and the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, many established civil rights and Black Power leaders viewed the NOI warily. Its emphases on moral rectitude, economic independence, and the development of autonomous black institutions placed it squarely within a nationalist tradition reaching back to Booker T. Washington, yet its critiques of black popular culture and popular artists, its advocacy of black separatism, and its theological grounding in a contemporary African American interpretation of Islam rendered it an anomaly among secular nationalist and pan-Africanist organizations, and its recruitment from the ranks of prisoners and drug addicts distanced it from middle-class civil rights groups. As the public face of the NOI, Farrakhan was, in a word, a misfit: a man widely admired for his uncompromising critiques of American society, whose authority as a spokesman was rooted in an organization viewed as unlikely to gain political traction among the masses of black people.

“Farrakhan the Minister” works to mitigate the strangeness of the NOI for a geographically diverse Soul! audience interested in yet unfamiliar with Black Muslims beyond Malcolm X. Rather than pursuing questions that might lead Farrakhan to criticize civil rights leaders or organizations, drawing attention to painful rifts within the black polity, Haizlip queries him from the viewpoint of the middle-class convert that the NOI was seeking at the time. Can “black professionals,” he asks, “be of service” to the NOI without giving up the pleasures of pork and nicotine? Must such converts follow all of its precepts, including those governing dress? What does getting one’s X entail? Some of Haizlip’s questions, while asked with an air of ingenuousness, touch on riskier issues, underscoring the gap between the NOI and more progressive black nationalist organizations like the Black Panthers. In this way, questions of gender enter the conversation early on. Why, Haizlip asks, do NOI women have to cover themselves, thereby drawing attention to their difference, while Black Muslim men may occupy public spaces relatively inconspicuously? What is the NOI’s viewpoint on polygamy? Where does it stand on women’s sexuality, outside of or within marriage?

The inviting set design of “Farrakhan the Minister,” unlike the drab,
suggestively domestic set of “Baldwin and Giovanni,” fosters a relaxed, conversational ambience. The two men—Haizlip in a dark dress shirt and slacks, Farrakhan in a military-style tan suit complete with epaulets and an insignia bearing three stars—sit on modern leather armchairs separated by a small table bearing NOI symbols, including the red-and-white NOI flag and a large framed portrait of Elijah Muhammad. Members of the studio audience, including a few scattered children, are arranged in a circle around the small stage, some in rows, others at small tables repurposed from the Club Soul set; most are identifiable as Muslim through their attire and hairstyles (for once, Afros do not dominate the room). On the far back wall of the studio enormous letters spelling soul are illuminated in rainbow colors; at the center of the room, the men are spotlighted, with the audience dimly visible around them.

By previous agreement, Farrakhan opens and closes the episode with brief and, for the purposes of television, rather undynamic prepared statements, which he delivers standing up and facing the audience, in the manner of a political candidate; but most of the episode is structured around Haizlip’s questions and Farrakhan’s answers, each of which is a miniature oration, and each of which is received with a hearty round of audience applause. Throughout, Farrakhan appears smiling and in his element; at times, his bearing is almost beatific. Audience members mirror his self-assured contentment, sitting with upright postures and straight-ahead looks and interspersing the minister’s commentary with supportive nods and audible interjections of “uh-huh” or “yes, sir!” that sonically evoke the black church, an irony in light of Farrakhan’s later equation of Christians and junkies. This performance of minister and flock is echoed in a somewhat unusual display of physical affection between host and guest. More than once, as the audience applauds, Haizlip leans forward to slap palms with Farrakhan. At the end, the two engage in a sustained embrace.

Such physical intimacy between Haizlip and Farrakhan—notably absent in “Baldwin and Giovanni,” despite the affective warmth of the writers’ dialogue—conveys a mutual desire to enact solidarity in the face of what, by a certain reckoning, was the social and ideological chasm separating the two men. In his questions, Haizlip, his frequent on-screen cigarette conspicuously absent out of respect for Black Mus-
lim prohibitions on tobacco, offers the minister several opportunities to expound on beliefs that would seem to directly implicate him and his misfit friends. Notwithstanding the discomfort this might provoke, the vibe between the two is extraordinary friendly. Indeed, “Farrakhan the Minister” foregrounds the spectacle of black fraternity: the natural animosity between two antagonistically constructed black male identities is easily overcome by Haizlip’s verbal and embodied expressions of respect.

We can best discern the performativity of this warmth between the two men at the moment, about twenty minutes into the episode, when Haizlip questions Farrakhan about the NOI’s recruitment of prison inmates, introducing homosexuality into their conversation.

Very recently—and this probably gets back to the morality or immorality—we’ve seen quite a few incidents where prisoners—and I think it’s a known fact that quite a few of the people who have been brought into the Nation of Islam have discovered their righteousness while incarcerated in a prison. And one of the things that most males, and now I understand from the news that’s coming out a lot of females, have to deal with is homosexual relations in prisons. How can they serve the Nation of Islam, and does the fact that a man is a homosexual have anything to do that would negate his coming into the Nation and being dealt with by the Nation?27

Such forthrightness on Haizlip’s part would be notable even if we were not able to contrast it with Baldwin’s conspicuous silence about non-normative sexuality in “Baldwin and Giovanni.” Indeed, it is particularly audacious, for although couched as a query about prisoners who presumably have little opportunity to satisfy their sexual needs with opposite-sex partners, it posits the existence of black gay men and lesbians, joining notions of practice and identity. Moreover, the question would seem to put the unspoken “secret” of Haizlip’s own sexuality squarely into the open. Is Haizlip, a man regarded as effeminate for his “very correct” manner of speaking, outing himself in this moment, in the manner of someone asking about some embarrassing or shameful matter supposedly on behalf of a friend? Is the Soul! host asking how the NOI might “deal with” him? Or is he attempting to point up a contradiction within the NOI, which accepts converts from pris-
ons yet regards homosexual acts—indeed, all sex not in the service of reproduction—as an anathema? To what degree might Haizlip be “queering” the NOI or its members, from ex-convict Elijah Muhammad to the most famous NOI convert from prison, Farrakhan’s late teacher and role model, Malcolm X?

As though to underscore the destabilizing implications of this question, the camera initially displays Farrakhan’s response through the image of Haizlip’s reaction to it. “Let me say this, my dear brother,” Farrakhan says to Haizlip, who maintains an impassive expression but leans forward slightly, “and to you in our viewing audience, the honorable Elijah Mohammad has been raised up by Allah not to condemn our people but to reclaim the fallen black man of America.” The crowd shouts its approval. A second camera switches from this reaction shot to a medium shot of Farrakhan, who launches into a lengthy recitation of NOI teachings about homosexual “deviance” and the promise of Islam to restore black men and women to their heterosexual “nature.” At one point, during a break for applause, Haizlip looks as though he might attempt another question, but instead he shifts his body slightly in his chair and gently clears his throat. Farrakhan continues:

We didn’t learn this freakish behavior in Africa [shouts of “No, sir!” from the audience]. You cannot find brothers in Africa walking around with broken [limp] wrists [he demonstrates with his own hands; shouts of “No sir!”]. You don’t find women in Africa running with women. We learned that behavior in our sojourn in America [shouts of “Yes, sir!”]. So since we learned this behavior, we can unlearn this behavior. [Applause interrupts the minister, who puts his hands up, palms forward, signaling that he has not yet finished] . . . There is no such thing [he brings his fist down forcefully on the arm of his chair] as a homosexual that cannot be changed. There is no such thing as a lesbian that cannot be changed. Almighty God Allah is here to change us all up, again, into a new growth and to bring us back to the natural order in which we were created.

At this conclusion of his monologue, which lasts four and a half minutes, the minister sits back in his chair to bask in the audience’s thunderous applause, while Haizlip extends his right hand for a palm slap
that morphs into a soul handshake. Haizlip’s microphone picks up his voice (it is not clear whether he intends to be heard) as he says to Farrakhan, “You’re incredible. You are incredible.” The applause continues as the camera switches to a jib-arm shot of the studio; from above, we see Haizlip raise his bent arms, palms open toward the minister, and lean forward, gently shaking his head from side to side.

I read Haizlip’s gesture, just short of a bow, as an expression of combined admiration for and surrender to the virtuosity of Farrakhan’s oratorical excursion, if not its thesis of homosexuality as a kind of freakishness. (The contemporary equivalent is the half-ironic expression “I’m not worthy,” offered to a mock rival.) I mean surrender here in the sense of Haizlip’s allowing himself to be moved by Farrakhan, to be receptive to the emotional appeal of his condemnation of white American culture and his prophetic vision of a future in which change is not only possible but also imminent. Likewise, when Haizlip utters the words “You are incredible,” I take him to be conveying respect for Farrakhan’s self-assurance and its effects on his listeners, who appear spiritually and emotionally buoyed up by the minister’s performance. In applauding Farrakhan, Haizlip acknowledges the validation that his discourse of the natural black subject grants to the studio audience, as well as to Soul!’s viewers. The fact that this sense of community emerges in and through an aversion to homosexual “deviance” is not, therefore, beside the point, but neither is it determinative of the feelings of well-being and connectedness that Farrakhan’s performance of self-assuredness mediates. Through this performance, which encompasses Farrakhan’s words as well as his vibrations and physical bearing, black men can see themselves as powerful role models for black children, and women can see themselves as faithful wives and mothers of the black nation; as Muslims, both are able to experience pride in their rectitude and the strength of their faith.

On the surface, the handshake between Haizlip and Farrakhan would seem to require a certain self-censorship on Haizlip’s part, in addition to the subordination of self that is inherent to role of an interviewer whose job is to get his guest talking. Yet we need not read the handshake as a capitulation to homophobia or even as a sign of frictionless
ideological alignment. In his 1962 essay, “Letter from a Region of My Mind,” Baldwin describes being surprised at his own receptiveness to Elijah Muhammad during a private dinner at the latter’s South Side Chicago residence. Although Baldwin cannot embrace the Black Muslims’ apocalyptic vision or their faith, he finds himself personally drawn to Muhammad, a man who elicits palpable joy in his disciples. Moreover, he is drawn to the emotional truth of the NOI’s antipathy toward white people and finds that despite his political wariness of Muhammad and the NOI, he cannot write them off. Baldwin recounts this series of realizations with an acute awareness of the interests of white liberal readers of the *New Yorker*, the magazine in which his essay appears. That is, he fully anticipates that his refusal to condemn the Black Muslims and Muhammad will be seized on as a means of discrediting him, both as an individual and as a proxy for black intellectuals. But as much as he might chafe against Muhammad as an ideologue, Baldwin also chafes against the racialized policing of his discourse. He accordingly defends both his attraction to Muhammad and his entitlement to pursue subjects and affiliations likely to provoke anger among whites.28

Reading Haizlip’s embrace of Farrakhan through the lens of Baldwin’s defiant ambivalence as a black writer with access to prestigious white publications enables us to understand the *Soul!* host’s response to Farrakhan (whose name, given to him by Muhammad, means “charmer”) as a strategic display enacted with multiple publics in mind. As a performance of brotherhood despite personal and political differences in 1972, the men’s handshake symbolically rebuts the narrative of the waning of Black Power in the wake of disunity, political repression, and economic or political co-optation. In so doing, moreover, it tacitly decries the investment of television in the spectacle of black male intraracial discord and disagreement. Yet paradoxically, to produce this counter-representation of black male solidarity, the episode must also bring to the surface tensions and contradictions about issues of sexual identity and sexual practice. When Farrakhan promises American black men with “broken wrists” a return to their original African “nature” through Black Muslim teachings, a certain notion of brotherhood is fractured, even as a homophobic version of black community—one constructed under the sign of the management of sexual misfittedness—is instanti-
ated. The warm embrace of host and guest at the episode’s conclusion manages the misfit energies introduced into the room by Haizlip, allowing “Farrakhan the Minister” to come to a happy ending; but it cannot, finally, resolve or eliminate them.

The issue of homosexuality also arises in “Baraka, the Artist”—not as a topic for homophobic sermonizing but as one piece in a larger conversation about the political and social imaginary of cultural nationalism framed by riveting spoken-word performances that open and close the episode (figure 4.9). In this way, viewers are introduced to Baraka as a writer, performer, and orator before they learn—from Haizlip’s calculated, information-seeking questions—about the trajectory of his literary and political career, from his early interest in Richard Wright and Edgar Allan Poe to his work as a dramatist and founder of a Harlem theater collective, culminating in his move back to his natal city of Newark and his embrace of Kawaida, the Africanist philosophy associated with Maulana Karenga, leader of the nationalist group US Organization. We also learn about Baraka’s recent political work, in particular his leadership of the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN), a local, pan-ethnic black political coalition; and his chairmanship of the Congress of African Peoples, a national umbrella group of black political organizations.29

Like Farrakhan, Baraka appears on Soul! quite literally wearing his politics on his sleeve. At one point, in response to Haizlip’s observation that he is sporting a “new style of dress,” the poet, seemingly embarrassed by the Soul! host’s complimentary attention to his appearance, explains that the somber garment is a “nationalist dress suit” of African origin, designed by the president of Tanzania and functional for black American men put off by “the whole shirt-tie syndrome.”30 Visually, “Baraka, the Artist” recalls “Farrakhan the Minister” in other ways as well, employing a strikingly similar stage and lighting design. Instead of sitting in rows circling the stage, however, the studio audience for “Baraka, the Artist” is arranged at round tables that face it, lending the studio an air of a makeshift performance space or café. A small library of Baraka’s volumes, possibly from the producer’s own collec-
4.9. On “Baraka, the Artist” (November 1972), Amiri Baraka recites his poetry.
tion, replace the NOI coffee-table props of “Farrakhan the Minister,” serving, for the uninitiated, as an instructive illustration of Baraka’s literary achievements.

Yet whereas “Farrakhan the Minister” has a ceremonious air, reflected in the NOI leader’s tightly controlled orations in response to Haizlip’s gentle questions, “Baraka, the Artist” feels warm and intimate, even as it represents the writer as a revered figure. By Baraka’s own account, he and Haizlip had a cordial relationship, so their on-screen conversations on *Soul!—“Baraka, the Artist” was the poet’s fourth appearance since 1969—lacked the “painful formality” of most TV interviews with black nationalist leaders. Haizlip was a few years older than the writer, but along with other relatively privileged members of their generation, they had inherited a shared “structure of feeling,” Baraka recalled.31 Haizlip was, in Baraka’s eyes, a “cosmopolitan,” a “quintessential New York black sophisticate”; but unlike some who wore their intellects like armor, the producer combined an acute awareness of the issues of the day with a disarming ability to “pass as an interested observer . . . knowing what you’re talking about but at the same time being able to appear more or less objective.” In 1972 Baraka was doing a lot of public interviews, but “Soul! was different because Ellis was different. Ellis made you feel that you were talking to somebody who knew what you were talking about . . . who understood and knew how to shape his questions and [the] answers he thought those questions would provoke.”

As these comments suggest, the Baraka-Haizlip conversation—like the Baldwin-Giovanni dialogue and, albeit to a lesser degree, the Farrakhan-Haizlip interview—were mediated by a shared sense of black political commitment visible in the nonverbal elements of the performances, particularly in the facial and hand expressions and bodily miens that the television cameras intentionally sought out to add visual interest and detail to otherwise static spectacles. To return to a central argument of this book, the spectacle of collective black intimacy in *Soul!*—in this case, the spectacles of sympathetically aligned yet quite different black men and women talking to each other in a friendly but rigorous fashion, and in ways that did not end with punch lines—was, in and of itself, a key part of its message. Baraka remembered that “in that period there was a great deal more collective spirit in the Afro-American
community because there was the whole civil rights [movement], so people felt linked more closely because we all felt ourselves in some ways involved in that struggle.” To see these links enacted in Soul!’s conversational episodes and segments was a powerful experience for black audiences, not merely because such images were exceedingly rare on television, but also, and perhaps more important, because they galvanized and affirmed these links as they existed in the world beyond television.

In “Baraka, the Artist,” the intimacy and shared political purpose of the collective is represented through the specific intimacy of Baraka and Haizlip. Appearing relaxed, Baraka strikes various contemplative poses as they talk, sometimes looking down as if concentrating, at other moments resting his elbows lightly on his knees, a little like Rodin’s Thinker. Although he makes eye contact with the audience, in general his gaze demands less attention than Farrakhan’s, contributing to a sense that spectators are privy to Baraka’s interiority. Haizlip’s conversational cues and questions also strike an easy and familiar tone. For example, right after he welcomes Baraka back to Soul! and recites the long list of his guest’s achievements (reading from the back cover of Spirit Reach, Baraka’s latest volume of poetry), Haizlip congratulates him on the recent birth of a son and inquires after the health of his wife, Amina Baraka.32 At another point, about five minutes into the interview, Haizlip is more explicit about his personal acquaintance with Baraka. “I’ve known you for quite a number of years, and everything you’ve said today is very beautiful and very gentle,” he observes. “What makes you so controversial?”

Even as Haizlip moves on to less ostensibly personal terrain, Baraka repeatedly reroutes the conversation toward the familiar and the familial, so that the writer’s family becomes a primary topic of conversation, not merely a tool for breaking the ice. For example, when Haizlip inquires about the sustainability of CFUN in light of the historical vulnerability of black male leaders who threaten the white power structure, Baraka asserts that CFUN is “a family,” not merely an organization, and goes on to answer the question about leadership in terms of intrafamilial legacy. “My wife is as articulate and involved with nationalism,
pan-Africanism, and Ujama [a Kawaida principle] as I am,” he notes, referring to Amina Baraka as an embodiment of the cultural nationalist ideal:

I don’t think there’s that separation. I think that maybe in other generations, there was a thing where husband did this [gesture with hand] and the wife was somewhere else. But that is incorrect. It’s incorrect. Because first of all, the children are the ones who are going to carry on the struggle if you get cut down. And the women are the ones who teach the children, contrary to what anybody might think. . . . And if they somehow have a reactionary ideology based on them not being stride for stride with you, it means that you really can’t make your next cycle the way you should, because there’s a gap. And that’s why brothers always say you can tell how revolutionary a people will be by how revolutionary the women are.

As Baraka talks, the eye of the camera scans the audience, which contains a notably large (for *Soul!*) number of children (figure 4.10). It lands first on the image of a female audience member holding a sleeping child and subsequently on a group of older children, who fidget as they listen. Such images would seem to illustrate Baraka’s points, while adding visual interest to the relatively static spectacle of the interview. (The camera similarly homes in on children in the studio audience at parallel moments of “Farrakhan the Minister:”) It comes as more a surprise when, a few minutes later, as Baraka is discussing the origin and manufacture of his nationalist dress suit, the sounds of an infant crying off-camera can be distinctly heard, persisting beyond a few quickly hushed squalls. The impromptu noise of the baby defies the convention of the studio space as a highly controlled sonic environment, where microphones strategically amplify certain sounds while muffling or silencing others. Not only does it indicate that the producers and director permitted very young children to attend the taping of the episode, although they could not be expected to conform to conventions of noiseless spectatorship, but it also suggests that the unrehearsed sounds of children crying or talking were to be incorporated in the aural design of the episode. Anticipated or not, the fortuitous accident of the baby’s crying af-
ffects the atmosphere in the room. Sonically, it transports viewers from the counterpublic space of the *Soul!* studio to the black counterpublic spaces, where unprompted sounds are more common—perhaps to an arts event or a political meeting, complete with women dragging sleepy or restless children along with them.  

Haizlip’s response to Baraka’s assertions about his wife’s role in their nuclear family, as a miniature of the black national family, takes the form of an implicit critique. Echoing his questions to Farrakhan about homosexuals and homosexuality in the NOI, Haizlip inquires about the role of black women who are not wives or mothers in Baraka’s vision of black radical politics. Can those women be protagonists of revolutionary struggle outside of their domestic roles? Agreeing with Baraka’s premise that a nationalist political movement can succeed only if it includes women, Haizlip laughs slightly and then challenges Baraka in a more assertive tone: “But then that raises the other problem that in the society today, there’s so many instances where the males are be-

ing ripped off by drugs, there’s a great deal of homosexuality, there’s an overpopulation of black women who do not have men to fulfill the necessary chores to support them. So how can you utilize and use them in your organization? Does it make it a polygamous situation, or is it a monogamous situation, or how do you as a family operate?”

Using unmarried heterosexual women as an example, Haizlip challenges Baraka’s commitment to the nuclear family as the privileged social unit of revolutionary political struggle. Noting that many people—including, presumably, drug addicts and male homosexuals—are unable or unwilling to imagine themselves in such a construct, he points to the backward-looking deployment of both the family and motherhood in cultural nationalist discourses. Baraka shrugs off the issue of polygamy, noting that he and his wife are “very monogamous”—an assertion that draws a spontaneous reaction from Haizlip (“That’s going to surprise a lot of people,” he interrupts with a laugh). In any case, he says, polygamists have no time for politics: “Their revolution would be coming in that house, trying to deal with all the women.”

Although Baraka makes a nervous and awkward joke of it, the question of polygamy is significant, not only because it inquires into the limits of nationalist idealizations of supposedly African social and sexual practices (looking back to Farrakhan’s assertion that homosexuality is absent in African society and to their discussions of the Black Muslim family), but also because it so clearly points to the redundancy of women within cultural nationalist conceptions of revolutionary politics. In imagining the lot of the black nationalist polygamist to be “deal[ing] with all the women,” Baraka notably projects women as the wards of male nationalists, when in fact the domestic scene he conjures also clearly situates women as the caretakers of the nationalist home. Although Haizlip does not mention her, Giovanni—in her articulation of a desire for a future defined by new gender and sexual arrangements of the black family—is very much present in this moment. So, too, perhaps more obviously, is Haizlip, as a gay man excluded from the nationalist family’s reproductive economy.

Where the publicity of black misfittedness is concerned, these moments when Haizlip questions the role of women in the nationalist fam-
ily are significant for their articulation of a gendered critique of this family’s resemblance to the bourgeois nuclear family—the very construction associated with the division of spheres that Baraka claims to have transcended. Although Baraka’s praise of his wife might seem to suggest her political equality, in fact his discourse reveals how nationalism’s elevation of women as teachers of children is predicated on placing these women in traditional domestic roles. In other words, the ideal of mothers as teachers envisions a highly gendered distribution of labor within domesticity, leaving imbalances of power in the black counter-public sphere intact. Not only does Baraka’s phrase about women keeping up “stride for stride” recall Giovanni’s complaint that even radical black men insist on women’s being “ten paces behind,” but his vision of contemporary domestic arrangements, far from improving on the past, also reifies the distinction between feminized domestic labor and masculinized work and politics. However conversant with and involved in nationalist politics Amina Baraka is, her husband’s comments do not indicate a public role for her as an activist except through her role as wife. Indeed, his assumption that “the children are the ones who are going to carry on the struggle” is notable for skipping over the political agency of black women, and it contrasts with the very public—indeed, iconic—roles of the female partners of imprisoned, exiled, or assassinated male activists, including Shabazz, Kathleen Cleaver, Myrlie Evers, Coretta Scott King, Lynn Brown, and Miriam Makeba, when she was married to an exiled Stokely Carmichael.

In fact, this part of the interview culminates in Baraka’s most explicit conflation of the nationalist family with the bourgeois nuclear family. After expounding briefly on polygamy, Baraka reiterates his commitment to reproductive nuclearity within black revolutionary practice:

Basically, it is revolutionary for a black man and a black woman to live together according to a black value system and raise a revolutionary family. In America, boy, that’s revolution right there. [He looks to Haizlip, who nods gently and smiles, then looks down at his notes, as though preparing for a subsequent question.] Especially if you’re raised up in a neighborhood where nobody’s got a father. You might be the stranger on the block ’cause you’ve got a father and mother who live in the same house. That
was my situation. We were strange on our block ’cause all our people [he turns to audience] were still there [he points with a hand to an imaginary place].

What Roderick Ferguson calls the “unprecedented and often unconscious intimacies” of the “radical and the hegemonic” in 1970s black nationalist thought are on full display in this moment, as Baraka, drawing on his own memories of feeling like a misfit for having grown up in a middle-class nuclear family, argues that the path to revolution lies in the claiming of a normativity historically denied the black family. In so doing, Baraka not only reinscribes single black women as redundant to the revolutionary family unless and until they partner and reproduce with black men, but he also shuts the door on alternatives that might include in the nationalist ideal those who are misfitted with the reproductive, nuclear ideal. A few minutes later, in the course of describing his idea for a new play, he returns to the point, telling Haizlip that the new work will be “about something that is quite normal . . . about black people achieving health, you know what I mean, and normalcy in our time.” Although it originates in opposition to a legacy of othering, Baraka’s articulation of black liberation with the recuperation of social norms comes perilously close to the discourse of the Moynihan Report, which made the case for viewing the misfitted Negro family as an object of liberal social welfare policy. Indeed, Baraka’s own prescriptions for achieving such normalcy assume that the family can be rendered a tool of radical social renewal (for example, in disseminating a “black value system”) without any alteration in form.

The moments of friction between Haizlip and Baraka in “Baraka, the Artist” are not as overt or disruptive as those in “Farrakhan the Minister,” and therefore not as demanding of a reparative public display of brotherhood. Thus, they are allowed to remain as tensions that invite viewers, following Haizlip’s example, to think about the ways their own families might or might not fit the nationalist norm and whether they aspire to normalcy as Baraka defines it. Interestingly, toward the end of the interview, Baraka offers an alternative vision of the black collective imagined as a confederacy of socially differentiated “tribes.” In response to Haizlip’s question regarding whether “outsiders” can contribute to
CFUN’s work in Newark, Baraka is notably ecumenical: “We believe that black people in America have as many tribes as our brothers and sisters on the continent, and so we have to learn how to detribalize ourselves even while being tribed, begin to work with each other to work toward larger goals.” Here Baraka’s language registers an intriguing shift away from the discourse of the nuclear family. But by the time he introduces the metaphor of the tribe, the interview has run its course. Haizlip concludes in his usual fashion. “Imamu,” he says, addressing Baraka with the Swahili word for “spiritual leader” (pronounced “ee-mah-mu”), “you’re a very beautiful man, and I thank you.”

Giovanni’s impassioned dialogue with Baldwin and Haizlip’s respectful but critical interviews of Farrakhan and Baraka are generative performance texts for scholars interested in black arts and Black Power. As televised enactments of the sometimes strained relationships and unanswered questions between parties united in a common purpose and a shared critique of white supremacy, they illustrate that black expression in the early 1970s was far from uniform, although the categories through which we retroactively engage with this era often flatten out differences and alliances alike. In particular, Soul! provides examples of performance events in which varieties of black radical political thought are pointedly called to account for their embrace of normativity, whether in the form of the affirmation of black masculinity at the expense of black women, the repression of queer energies and identities, or the idealization of the black nuclear family. This may seem like an obvious point, but it is in danger of being lost in contemporary revisionist scholarship, which can inadvertently create the impression that nationalism—although a dominant expression of 1970s black radicalism—was not answerable to emerging queer and feminist critiques.

Soul!’s visual representations of Haizlip and Giovanni as deferential but also questioning interlocutors of three commanding male figures is crucial insofar as they offer spectacles of black heterodoxy and differences within the black community. Through its dialogue format, which encouraged dynamic, affectively infused performances, the program avoided the static representations of public-affairs programs (including
Black Journal), which favored moderated debates between the usually male representatives of different factions or organizations. In the case of the Baraka and Farrakhan episodes of Soul!, the audible and visible presence of the studio audience contributed to feelings of intimacy on the set and, more important, decentered the authority of the figures on stage, who might be interrupted by spectators’ applause or the sounds of a crying baby. In the Soul! dialogues, a speaker’s posture, her facial expression, the moment at which he sighed or took a deep drag on a cigarette, and the moment when he leaned in for a brotherly handshake were just as communicative as formal statements of position; in fact, they sometimes undercut or complicated the conflicts that surfaced in arguments between dissenting parties. In the “Baldwin and Giovanni” episodes, Baldwin’s silences and evasions about his own queerness are complicated and undercut by the communicative performance of his voice and body (obscured in the text of the published Dialogue). And in “Farrakhan the Minister,” Haizlip’s deferential gestures toward and moments of physical intimacy with the NOI leader complicate, while surfacing, the submerged context of Haizlip’s own status as Soul!’s gay male host. The agency of misfit energy and affect on the Soul! set underscores the value of the Soul! archive to our understanding of the intimacies and camaraderie possible despite or within difference—indeed, of the ways such difference might have itself been constituitive of a certain affect of togetherness.

Where cultural histories of black arts and Black Power are concerned, Soul! is not only an archive of what Vertamae Grosvenor called the “invisible community” of black nonconformists, including Haizlip and Giovanni; it is also a misfit enterprise, in the sense that it does not fit neatly within twenty-first-century scholarly narratives of cultural resistance to patriarchy and homophobia.37 As I have argued, Haizlip’s handshake with Louis Farrakhan, which might appear to perform the Soul! host’s capitulation to queer invisibility, actually enacts a much more complex dynamic, in which camaraderie (what I have called brotherhood) is shot through with critique, refusal, and resistance, and in which the encounter with the homophobic subject is an opportunity to counter homophobia and prompt an acknowledgment of gay men and lesbians in the black community. The analytical rubric of black
misfittedness enables us to recognize how freakishness was itself a site of contestation, variously embraced as a source of creativity and paradoxical social agency and rejected as a deviation from imagined norms of identity and family.

*Soul!’s* status as a misfit enterprise derives, finally, from its culturally eccentric location on public television, a medium only now being recognized as a significant site of black radical political and aesthetic undertakings in the 1960s and 1970s. If *Soul!* demonstrates television to have been a platform for more diverse performances of blackness than previously acknowledged, it also compels us to reconsider powerful nationalist views of the medium of television as hopelessly compromised by virtue of its embeddedness in market logics and social relations. Although operating in a context that afforded limited or highly controlled visibility to diversity in the black political culture of the 1970s, Haizlip and the team of misfits who created *Soul!* labored to provide a stage for a variety of identities, ideologies, and energies. Their work remains a powerfully affecting archive of performers and performances that moved, and continue to move, to different drums.