

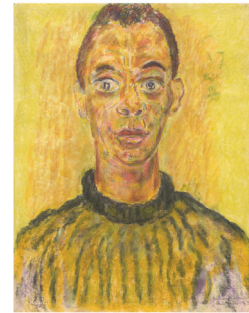
Baldwin's Sissy Heroics

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Baldwin's Sissy Heroics

In James Baldwin's 1972 autobiographical polemic, *No Name in the Street*, he presents us with a shocking sexual anecdote that positions him at once as innocently scandalized object and voyeuristic subject:

I have never, for example, written about my unbelieving shock when I realized that I was being groped by one of the most powerful men in one of the states I visited. He had got himself sweating drunk in order to arrive at this despairing titillation. With his wet eyes staring up at my face, and his wet hands groping for my cock, we were both, abruptly, in history's ass-pocket. (61)

We could, in the manner of Kathryn Stockton's book *Beautiful Bottom*, interpret this as a parable of alluring shame in which intragender, crossracial attraction is characteristically affiliated with the penetrated asshole,¹ by spotlighting what Leo Bersani so aptly calls a "malignant aversion" (4) to the specter of anal penetration. To be associated with the asshole is not only to be beset by uncontrollable wastage; it is to be bereft of phallic subjectivity and agency.² History's "ass-pocket," however, is not quite the same as history's asshole. History's ass-pocket is, in effect, the racial cul-de-sac, the highly sexualized but frustratingly unfuckable dead end, which we enter while desperately searching for a way to mutual pleasure, a way out of racist power's myriad erotic traps.

It is not miscegenation and homosexuality, race and sex, that shock Baldwin, but instead the perverse violence with which these conjoin in the Southern white man's mind and in the U. S. national imaginary and body politic. "It was very frightening—not the gesture itself, but the abjectness of it, and the assumption of a swift and grim complicity: as my identity was defined by his power, so was my humanity to be placed at the service of his fantasies" (61; emphasis added). In case we might confuse shame over "the gesture itself" with shock at the violent significance of the gesture as an act of racist political disempowerment, Baldwin proceeds for several pages with his analysis: "This man, with a phone call, could prevent or provoke a lynching" (62). Behind the gesture of his harassing touch of Baldwin lies the political reality of the phone call that can prevent or provoke a lynching. "When the man grabbed my cock," Baldwin continues, "I didn't think of him as a faggot, which, indeed, if having a wife and children, house, cars, and a respectable and powerful standing in the community, mean anything, he wasn't." Baldwin is making a crucial distinction here. Faggotry is not substantively defined by the gender-object choice of erotic attraction; it is more relevantly a condition of the power that normalcy shields or exposes in its own distorted political-psychic interests, confused by the powerful with their desperate satiation of erotic desire.

This is a rare occasion when we see Baldwin explicitly addressing faggotry in his nonfiction, and doing so in a way that spotlights his own sexuality. In the last decade, Baldwin critics have demanded and brought attention to his sexual orientation as a key coordinate for understanding the racial infrastructure of his writing and its impact and reception within African America and beyond. This new work represents a seismic shift in Baldwin studies.³ These scholars have throttled us, and thus forced us to ask, in compellingly textured and theoretically capacious terms, what it means for Baldwin to speak from, and be read through, the habitus of black queer subjectivity.

Here I want to attend to a subtly different register related to this new inquiry into Baldwin as black queer man. I want us to materialize Baldwin the black sissy. Although we shall need here to discriminate between sissiness and homosexuality for both theoretical and ideological purposes, I do not want to erect any substantive barrier between the two. Indeed, as I argue elsewhere, and as I would like to tease out further in a moment, we can apprehend sissiness as the vestibule or threshold of faggotry.⁴

Baldwin is often seen as having mispronounced his decidedly obvious sexual orientation in rather cagey, fidgety locutions—not exactly blaring forcefully and forthrightly “I’m here, I’m queer, get used to it.” The most frequently cited case comes at the opening of the 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein titled “Go the Way Your Blood Beats” where, in response to Goldstein’s first question, “Do you feel like a stranger in gay America?” Baldwin responds, in part:

The word “gay” has always rubbed me the wrong way. I never understood exactly what is meant by it. I don’t want to sound distant and patronizing because I don’t really feel that. I simply feel it’s a world that has very little to do with me, with where I did my growing up. (174)

In response to Goldstein’s blunter second question, “You never thought of yourself as being gay?” Baldwin seems to equivocate more forcefully: “No. I didn’t have a word for it. The only one I had was ‘homosexual’ and that didn’t quite cover whatever it was I was beginning to feel” (174). The proceeding interview itself makes it clear why Baldwin so insistently resisted such labeling, and also makes clear that the intra-gendered direction of his erotic desire is *not* at stake in his label-quibbling. In fact, in responding to the question, “Do you feel like a stranger in gay America?” he pointedly targets the real problem with the assumptions loaded into that question when he replies, “Well, first of all I feel like a stranger in America from almost every conceivable angle except, oddly enough, as a black person” (174). It was the estrangement attached to the suspicion of homosexuality that intrigued, baffled, and motivated him in his inquiries. In a pathbreaking essay deserving of far more theoretical elaboration, “Here Be Dragons,” Baldwin writes,

On every street corner, I was called a faggot. This meant that I was despised, and, however horrible this is, it is clear. What was *not* clear at that time of my life was what motivated the men and boys who mocked and chased me. . . . For when they were alone, they spoke very gently and wanted me to take them home and make love. (684; original emphasis)

Baldwin found in homosexuality a clear path of desire; what’s not clear is the process of estrangement cathected to the suspicion of, or the projection of, intragender eroticism. I would suggest that the case of the sissy, the figure of the sissy, as a suspect vestibule that warrants a charge of faggotry, embodies this conundrum of estrangement that so puzzles Baldwin and motivates so much of what he writes.

In criticizing Baldwin for not embracing his gay identity forthrightly enough, we can easily forget the extent to which Baldwin was keenly aware that his very person itself manifested and staged his black faggotry in every conceivable public venue. Like that pubescent boy on the streets of Harlem, something strange about the man made him at once socially suspicious and erotically titillating to those males whose own gender normativity was presumably or visibly unassailable.⁵ Being so hypervisible as a black spokesman in the new mass media of the mid-twentieth century, Baldwin could not help but be aware of how his person would seem to impersonate too comfortably the audience’s notion of a homo in blackface, or a Negro encased in a faggot’s manner. When Baldwin exposes this “unbelievably shocking” experience of being groped by the white Southerner in 1972, he is entering upon his third decade as an international spokesman for the race, a role he often denied but one that was inescapable, given what Kobena Mercer calls “the burden of representation,” the racial compulsion to view any black figure who gains a platform within official global media

as improbably speaking on behalf of, and impossibly standing in for, the race as a whole.⁶

It is no surprise, then, that Baldwin's face captures the cover of the May 17, 1963 issue of *Time*, the first African American writer to be so honored, and a year before Martin Luther King, Jr. was placed on the cover. Although he is simply titled "Author" on the cover, his face is tellingly aligned with the civil rights movement, figured through the cover's upper-left cross-banner proclaiming "The Negro's Push for Equality." Designed by celebrated *Time* cover artist Boris Chaliapin, the magazine's signature fire-engine red frame for this issue gets Africanized through the black zigzag background to the right of Baldwin's face, as though to highlight the "African" phenotype of his head.⁸ What an odd idea that the head of a Negro man, devoid of his body or social context, can embody or signal the race's forward push.

When we turn to the cover story inside the magazine, however, we get an almost contrary angle on that distinctively Negroid face: "He is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Negro leader. He tries no civil rights cases in the courts, preaches from no pulpit, devises no stratagems for sit-ins, Freedom Riders or street marchers" ("Root" 26). This article captures perfectly, if somewhat half-consciously, exactly the predicament that I want to investigate as a case study. Baldwin was a racial spokesman or headman without portfolio, an extraordinarily unusual achievement in light of the political tradition in place since at least Reconstruction, when the U. S. establishment turned to "official" venues of African American leadership—government officials, presidents of black colleges, Christian ministers, and CEOs of national civil rights organizations—when choosing men who could serve as authoritative arbiters between the white state and the black race.⁹

Further complicating Baldwin's "head" status is the way in which his racial intermediation is couched within the public perception of his gender misplacement as a sissy. How could someone so sissified come to represent the race at a moment of both mass historical change in the racial status quo, manifested in the civil rights movement, and mass historical reaction against gender nonconformity, manifested in the consolidation of the Cold War state apparatus, the period from the end of World War II to the 1970s?¹⁰ For mass historical change, on both the left and the right, was strongly identified with the forward thrust of virile agency, not the impotence, weakness, flamboyance, and decadence projected onto the sissy as the epitome of limply nonprocreative effeminacy, an image consolidated during the Cold War as the ominous threat of national insecurity, figured as "softness," lurking at the heart of the state and its cultural arms.

Identified not as a novelist, but instead as the author of the 1961 essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name* and of *The Fire Next Time*, the *Time* article positions Baldwin oddly, on the one hand as the central, most authoritative voice of the Negro, and on the other, as estranged from the offices and attributes of typical Negro leadership, a racial estrangement coded at the outset of the article through a misgendering description of Baldwin's sissy persona: "He is a nervous, slight, almost fragile figure, filled with frets and fears. He is effeminate in manner, drinks considerably, smokes cigarettes in chains, and he often loses his audience with overblown arguments" (26). The article categorizes him as a male improperly gendered by outright labeling him "effeminate" and by juxtaposing, on the one hand, the diminutive—indeed the self-diminishing—body (nervous, slight, fragile, fretful, fearful) against the oversized, over-the-top effect that this body stages through its uncontrollable, or at least uncontrolled, excesses: overdrinking, chain-smoking, overblown arguing. By emphasizing the compulsive vulnerabilities of the author's mouth through images of oral fixation—drinking, smoking, overarguing—the article makes that more respectable aperture of the upper body, normatively the legitimate organ from which masterful sociopolitical change is uttered and issued—the mouth—almost as taboo as its bottom contrary, the asshole.

As Lee Edelman has noted astutely, this passage from the *Time* story effectuates the same gender-racial work that was accomplished by nicknaming Baldwin “Martin Luther Queen” during the 1960s and ’70s. Edelman argues that this label participates in “the enforcement of a normalizing sexual taxonomy . . . generating . . . a surplus value of cultural authority through the political recognition and identification of the gay man whose sexuality must be represented as legible precisely because it ‘threatens’ to pass unremarked” (43).¹¹ Although I agree with Edelman’s observation here concerning the sexual policing work that the label intends, I want to point out that Baldwin is explicitly and decidedly not labeled “gay” or “homosexual” in the article, a point that cannot be overlooked given how dominant discourse—and indeed queer theory itself—rushes to equate male effeminacy with homosexuality, a rush that I want to forestall and theorize through the frame of sissy impersonation.¹² It is this rushing tendency to overdetermine the sissy through the subject-identity of the homosexual—both in dominant discourse and in queer theory—that I want to interrogate through the extraordinary case of Baldwin’s racial headmanship, seeking more largely to understand how the sexual dynamic of this rushing overdetermination is anchored in a racial logic.

This point about what gets named and what does not is crucial also because where racial gendering is concerned, what cannot or refuses to be said communicates as powerfully as what *claims* to be said. The oversized head on the *Time* cover cannot mark Baldwin’s sissy impersonation—and indeed goes in the other direction of drawing out his genealogical and thus potentially procreative racial, and even African authority. (As we’ll see later, a sissified demeanor can be communicated through a still photograph, but it is nearly impossible to do so with an unadorned headshot.) Instead, it is left to the inside cover story to expose the insidious paradox, verging on the insider joke of the label “Martin Luther Queen”: the big black headman who speaks for the race is hardly a man at all. If the power of his racial writing and oratory resounds across continents, the sissy demeanor of his body—its wasteful excesses, trembling vulnerabilities, and cowering fragility—provides some measure of comfort to the racial-sexual status quo, in this case the “liberal” fourth estate of political and “feature” journalism.

As opposed to his fiction, where he repeatedly thematizes same-gender attraction in a series of highly controversial novels, beginning with *Giovanni’s Room* in 1956 and ending with *Just Above My Head* in 1979, in his prolific nonfiction before 1972 Baldwin had studiously avoided addressing homosexuality autobiographically.¹³ What is different about this 1972 anecdote in *No Name in the Street* is the extent to which it positions his person/a within the text autobiographically as a scandalized target of a white man’s same-sexual aggression. Why, at the apex of his fame, when it would seem that he has the most to lose from positioning himself as a sexual victim of white male rapaciousness, does he dramatize his own vulnerability to (homo)sexual penetration, voicing himself, so to speak, as the asshole of his own text?¹⁴

If we retrain our gaze on the role of the sissy, we shall see how Baldwin’s larger corpus offers as compelling an interrogation of queer identification as the more overtly homosexualized *Giovanni’s Room*. Forestalling that overdetermining leap from sissy to homosexual that usually occurs both in the homophobic phenomenon of fag-bashing and in the queer-affirmative movement of gay and lesbian studies, I suggest that the sissy formation, when distinguished from incipient or teleological homosexuality, can perform productive theoretical work for us, as it did for Baldwin. Implicit in this inquiry, then, is the idea that the sissy must be thickly contextualized in relation to not only nonconforming gender roles but also to recognizable racial formations. By observing the sissy as a liminal figure aligned with but not equal to homosexuality, resonant with but also estranged within African American cultural expression, I also hope to disrupt further what Lisa Duggan, Rod Ferguson, Jasbir Puar, and David Eng call “the homonormative,” an increasing assumption in national

discourse, ironically bolstered by dominant queer activism and theory, that “homosexuality is the same in all people,” an assumption that imagines and regulates same-sexuality as “a white racial formation” (Ferguson 62).¹⁵ Finally, this inquiry is intended to take us further beyond what I have elsewhere called the tyranny of the closet as the grounding logic silently racializing our current notions of sexual progress and progressive politics.¹⁶ At a textual level, this means that I want to challenge the notion, repeated in a variety of ways, that because Baldwin never explicitly “came out of the closet,” he is somehow damaged goods for queer studies.

In thinking through Baldwin’s sissy insurgency, then, I use the term “heroics” purposively to inflect his activism with all of the weight of the dominant meanings of heroism, including its masculine valences. Although the term is archaic to us, and certainly anachronistic in queer and gender studies and race theory, its usefulness for this inquiry is exactly its archaic tenor. As we shall see, Baldwin wanted to assert that the heroic action arrives and derives from the most seemingly unlikely quarters, not only from the fey, stigmatized person of a sissy-boy but also from the burdened, stooped, downcast bodies of grown black men Jim Crowed by the white-hot fire of racial humiliation and violation. In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin makes this astonishing critique of the sexually violent consequences of white supremacy through a characteristic rhetoric and narrative of sissy heroics.

Although we could certainly propose a semiotics of the sissified anatomy—for instance, focusing on diminutive stature perceived at odds not only with a boy’s gender assignment but also with his hyperbolic gestural vocabulary—I’m more interested here in the sociohistorically conditioned ways in which the perception of sissiness operates in tandem with racial assignation to diminish or enhance—and often both at once—public authority as cultural capital.¹⁷ One of the sociopolitical contexts that both animates and potentially disables Baldwin’s emergence as a sissy headman in the early 1950s is the Cold War campaign against homosexuality, which I would argue necessarily entails a campaign against sissiness as a national security threat.¹⁸ Paradoxically, the purging of homosexuality requires, at the same time, the public naming of homosexuals, a perverse predilection exposed not only by being caught in the sexual act, but more circuitously by being caught with extenuating evidence like pornography. As Robert Corber suggests, the upshot of these policing phenomena is the virtual disappearance of homosexuality from respectable public discourse. “Virtually the only way in which homosexuality could become a topic of debate in the political public sphere,” Corber writes, “was as a form of psychopathology that threatened national security” (85).¹⁹

Although Corber’s argument helps us to understand anxiety over the representation of homosexuality during the height of the Cold War, his conflation of effeminacy with homosexuality downplays the extent to which the sissy—the public perception of a gender-misplaced male—begins to stand in for the homosexual.²⁰ Indeed, the practice in queer theory of rushing to equate sissy impersonation with homosexual subjectivity ironically could be seen to stem from the countercultural Cold War discourse of hinting at homosexuality through a display of sissy attributes, getting around the state’s hysterical policing operation by paradoxically mirroring this hysteria through the cleverly portrayed hysterics of the sissified male. As Daniel Bell suggested in a 1955 essay, the division of the world into “free” and “Communist” produced within the U. S. a concomitant binary of “hard” versus “soft,” making the label “soft on Communism” the ultimate representation of political evil (67-70).

As K. A. Cuordileone has pointed out, this hard/soft binary redounds to a political establishment obsessed with distinguishing between a hard and soft manliness, whereby the sissified man, imputing homosexuality, exemplifies the extreme manifestation of softness as menace. The twisted Cold War logic embeds a double jeopardy for gender-nonconforming men. On the one hand, the sissy display embodies the extremity of the threat of subversive softness; on the other hand, the homosexual

who can hide his softness becomes a hidden subversive threat lurking in every corner of elite power. The perversity of this logic is amplified by the fact that it was a group of straight men who were reputedly homosexual—J. Edgar Hoover, Roy Cohn, and Whittaker Chambers, to name only a few of the most notoriously powerful—who protected the nation's manly hardness and whose vendetta in prosecuting and purging the soft sissies of communist infiltration vindicates Baldwin's point that homosexually inclined men, when manipulating the levers of American imperial power, cannot be considered faggots.²¹

With so much political explosiveness loaded ironically onto the "soft" unmanly shoulders of the sissy as the harbinger of homosexual subversion, it should not be surprising that sissified impersonation emerges within a celebrity-driven commodity culture in the 1950s as a lucrative career, at least for a few elite among white sissies. In the figure of Truman Capote, the most fitting instance, we find the perfect foil to Baldwin's black sissy insurgency. Capote burst onto the scene in 1948 at the age of twenty-three with the publication of his best-selling novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Although repeatedly characterized as a homosexual novel, like Baldwin's first novel that would appear five years later, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Capote's is best described as a sissy bildungsroman that repeatedly hints at a homosexual predilection through its overwrought symbolism of gender inversion and failure, bodily mutilation and freakishness, and general air of fatally corrupt but seductive perversion.²² Written in a hyperbolically aestheticized style, the narrative itself is mirrored by the scandalous jacket photograph of the young sissy author, seductively lounging like a girl with his right hand caressing, not quite groping, his crotch.²³ Having carefully posed himself for this photograph—and many others like it—Capote, like his close friend, Andy Warhol, became the epitome of the mass culture sissy, whose cultural production somehow achieves a notoriety at once seeming to approximate elite cultural status while also seeming to expose, if only softly and impishly, the nasty underbelly—we might say the asshole—of the ugly commodification undergirding pretensions to cultural high-mindedness.

The Cold War hysteria over the soft man as national menace produces the rare spectacle of the sissy artist as alluring narcissistic subject staring shamelessly back at white, middle-class, straight suburban society as a perversely obverse image of itself. Although the cultural productions of spectacular white sissies like Capote and Warhol have been, and arguably can be, read as radically subversive in light of the Cold War state apparatus which they modishly mock, their self-parodic antics seem to pale into high cultural annoyance when placed next to Baldwin's polemically saturated and politically targeted sissy insurgency. Although in many ways Baldwin and Capote do mirror each other (Figs. 1 and 2),²⁴ Baldwin's black sissy impersonation, alien to the public image of the modish white sissy who ambivalently molds and mocks high cultural taste, participates in an indigenous African American adaptation of the sissy, who is at once a figure of racial embarrassment to the proper manning of the race and also a figure of economic and educational opportunity, for sissies in African American communities often became extra breadwinners with no family of their own, adoptive uncles who helped to finance the education of needy nephews and nieces and worked as respectable, if circumspect, teachers, choir ministers, nurses, and secretaries.²⁵

This is not to suggest that black sissies could not theoretically invade the depoliticizing sphere of self-parodic commodification of celebrity culture exploited by white sissies like Capote and Warhol. If Capote's effete white sissy impersonation is the cultural inverse of Baldwin's politically obligated black sissy persona, then the converse of Baldwin is Little Richard, born Richard Wayne Penniman, who burst onto the international scene in 1955, two years after Baldwin's sissy first novel, with his gender-bending, history-making first pop music hit, "Tutti Frutti." Little Richard unabashedly displayed the signs of his sissy persona in the publicity photography from the era, as he proudly wears a pompadour with marcel waves high on the head,



Fig. 1: Publicity photo of Baldwin in 1963, smoking a cigarette (Bettman/Corbis).



Fig. 2: Publicity photo of Capote, posing outdoors with cigarette (Bettman/Corbis).

along with make-up and often, loud colors not appropriate for men (Fig. 3). Meticulously but brashly blending what he had learned in church, the street, the honky-tonk, the carnival, and the revival meeting as well as in the Macon bus depot where he worked and where he encountered the city's gay underworld, Little Richard takes the persona of the all-out swishing, unapologetic, fierce sissy who fights with his hands as fiercely as his mouth onto the world stage with a song that suburban white teens could innocently mistake for being about the innocuous pleasures of a newly marketed ice-cream flavor.

"Tutti Frutti," in its original version, celebrated the pleasures of anal intercourse, ambiguously figured as male-male and/or male-female, as the unexplained exclamation of the androgynous name "Rudi" at the heart of the refrain seems to suggest.²⁶ In helping to usher in crossover rock 'n' roll as a countercultural menace bubbling up from the nasty bottoms of hysterically policed Cold War society, Little Richard appears to do for pop culture, in a more disastrously disruptive way, what Capote and Warhol do for elite, effete high society. Like Baldwin's clipped and lipping eloquence as a spokesman for the race, Little Richard's snarling, popping, screeching erotic noise announces the arrival of the black sissy, not exactly as a credit to the race, but as a flaunting presence whose racialized homoeroticism cannot be completely shamed or purged. Indeed, Little Richard's swishing fierceness makes little Capote look downright impishly respectable.²⁷

Baldwin's scandalous anecdote from *No Name in the Street* may seem a far distance in tone, style, and address from Little Richard's raucous "Tutti Frutti," but they share a crossracial double address in a way that Capote's cultural productions—despite his Faulknerian reference to blackness as a touchstone for a natural but untakeable path toward redemption for the effetely decadent white sissy-boy—cannot emulate. Little Richard and Little Jimmy, neither a stranger to the fact of America's lynching penchant, punctuate and spectacularize their blackness through their sissy impersonation—rather than, as critics tend to suggest about both, enacting publically some inevitable warfare between being black and being gay. In other words, their sissiness ironically



Fig. 3: Little Richard poses for an early portrait circa 1952 in Atlanta, Georgia.
Photo by Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images.

enhances the consequence of their black cultural expressiveness as artists, hyping a blackness that can be intelligibly read through their sissy performances and at the same time mystifying and blocking the full legibility of their black inheritance by signifying on it, shading it with a fierce sissy posture.

If the bloody history of lynching castration haunts the confrontational theatrics of their sissy impersonations, turning the “soft” ass of the sissy into a hard-assed defiance of straight white hegemony, it is also the case that they are playing a dangerous Cold War game.²⁸ The racial implication of Little Richard and Little Jimmy’s sissy insurgency makes all the more visible the ways in which a white sissy like Capote accrues his capital as high culture nuisance through the spectral invisibility of his whiteness, and both Capote and Warhol heighten this spectral whitening by emphasizing a hyperblondness in their bodily aesthetic, a fey blondness that seems to ironize their disgraceful puncturing of the white male privilege upon which their celebrity rides into enviable notoriety and admirable infamy.

Baldwin’s self-dramatizing appeal to a sissified subjectivity seems especially curious in light of the verbal bashings perpetrated upon the figure of the black homosexual in black nationalist writing of the period. Many critics have remarked how crucial is homophobic invective for such discourse, and more recently Rolland Murray has demonstrated how in *No Name in the Street* and elsewhere Baldwin responds directly, and perhaps caves in, to the aggressive masculinist logic that tends to undergird black nationalist ideology—a charge that would seem to contradict any notion of the text’s insurgent sissiness, a problem to which we’ll return later (Murray 27–35). The targeting of the black homosexual caught in the act, so to speak, in black nationalist writing proves instructive for understanding more generally the conventional response of reactionary masculinity in the face of a sissified person. In this discourse, any black man who allows contact—much more sexual congress—with a white man is immediately not only suspect but also branded as both a faggot and a race traitor.²⁹ Whether Eldridge Cleaver’s eager asspacker or Jones’s cocksucker, it is easy to spot the race traitor because he is caught in the act before our very eyes negotiating away the black man’s power in exchange for his own dubiously twisted erotic fantasy.³⁰

My point here is that it is not enough for these bad black nationalist brothers to imagine a black sissy, a male who ambiguously seems out of his gender-place; they must, as Phillip Brian Harper points out more generally about black nationalist invective, make the case in its extremity (39–53). Whereas on the street, the ambiguous marker of a sissy demeanor would be enough to warrant ridicule and dismissal or panic and bashing, in these texts the crossracial homosexual act itself must be graphically exhibited, as though caught *in flagrante delicto*. We need not rehearse the ways in which Cleaver, Baraka, and others are attempting to distance themselves from their own intragender, crossracial entanglements. (After all, what could be prissier than writing poetry?) Instead, we can focus here on how Baldwin himself ingeniously turns the tables on these homosexual scenes of racial treachery. Rolland Murray is certainly correct in suggesting that Baldwin writes *No Name in the Street* in direct response to this sort of black nationalist invective, and in fact, we could go further to see how Baldwin directly repudiates this homosexual frameup as the epitome of the racial double-cross, even as he attempts to dialogue with and integrate Black Power ideology into his polemic.

Baldwin keeps in place the characters of the double-cross as they are framed by Cleaver and Baraka: the powerful white man penetrating either orally or anally the passive and pacified black male spokesman. Given the graphic exhibition of cross-racial homosexuality as the manifestation of race betrayal, Baldwin’s decision in this text to stage this heretofore unreported groping incident seems especially puzzling, as it seems to expose his own perverse intimacy with the redneck in power, and thus to reaffirm the intrinsic betrayal lurking within his role as an integrationist

racial spokesman. Allowing us to catch him red-handed, so to speak, in exhibiting himself as the passive sexual object of the white Southerner's rapacious desire, Baldwin's anecdote seems to answer these black nationalists' indirect accusation with a direct confirmation. Baldwin's response, then, flagrantly exhibits the scene that such discourse is intended to prohibit.

Whereas the black nationalists reduce a literal expression of white male supremacy to a symbolic image of crossracial homosexuality, Baldwin does exactly the opposite: turning a literal act parading as homosexuality (the white man's grope) into an allegory of white male supremacy. If the powerful white man is so drunk on his own power that he cannot discipline the violating racial fantasies upon which his power is ideologically moored, it is also the case that the black victim, Baldwin himself, can manage no conventionally masculine reaction. Just as the only reasonable response a straight man could have when spotting a sissy is to assume that he is a faggot and brutalize him appropriately, so the only proper response any man, and especially any race man, could have to male groping is homosexual panic. Baldwin surely knows that he should have knocked the piss out of that white Southerner. Instead of a manly counterassault, Baldwin pictures himself alarmed, horrified, paralyzed by the shocking nature of such ordinary violence. This dramatization of his own fearful victimhood, like a sissy-boy who throws up his hands in alarm at the baseball racing toward his crotch, stages the sissy as a person of miscast gender who cannot brave the appropriate manly response to a racial crisis.

Like Little Richard, Baldwin is able to retain the sissy demeanor while also offering a contravening defiance of the soft weakness usually projected onto the sissy in dominant U. S. discourse, and can do so in part due to the notion of the sissy as a resourceful liminal figure within African American communities, on the one hand a boy willing to take it up the ass but just as likely, on the other hand, to kick some ass if manhandled inappropriately, as Little Richard himself was widely known to do on the mean streets of his hometown. Thus, the paradox of the groping incident from *No Name in the Street* is that Baldwin insists on the heroism, however ambivalent and revisionary, of his impassive stance in relation to the white male groper. In fact, Baldwin's ambivalence to his own estrangement from male power is indicated by the precise nature of the groping incident. Imagine how differently the incident would read if the white Southerner had groped Baldwin's ass rather than his cock. An ass-groping would place Baldwin more accurately in the position of Cleaver's and Jones's black faggot double-crosser. By having the white supremacist reach for Baldwin's cock, rather than his ass, Baldwin retains the literal gesture of homosexual attraction while resisting the implication of the sissy's subordination to an empty erotic hole waiting to be filled with the white man's semen. In other words, he retains his power to speak as a sissy, a man whose mannerism attracts sexual attention from another man, without reducing his own mouth to the black nationalist's eager asshole. By necessity, a sissy is a man out of place in the house of white male supremacy. To have an eccentric relationship to male supremacy is to be robbed of the power that flows from that status. The problem is how to achieve power without its accompanying logic of supremacy. In this sense, Baldwin's ambivalence toward straight masculinity and its powers makes sense. He is struggling to claim the right to the power without also laying claim to the supremacy that anchors maleness, whiteness, and straightness as arbiters of that power.

In intentionally signaling a girlish response to a manly assault, Baldwin boldly occupies the sissy's frame of reference in order to stand not so much outside as on the threshold separating black from white, manliness from femininity, straightness from faggotry, and power from supremacy. We can understand how the sissy assumes the mantle of heroic subject through the first glimpse we get of the autobiographical protagonist in the first pages of *No Name in the Street*, whose very title encapsulates the estranging status of the sissy's public stance. Baldwin begins the polemic with a

very odd anecdote from when he was around five years old. He hears his mother say, while handling a piece of black velvet, "That is a good idea." Fusing the mother's statement with the material display of black velvet, little Jimmy "for years afterward . . . thought that an 'idea' was a piece of black velvet" (3). This is an axiomatic error that immediately defines the little boy's sissy status. He is too intimately joined to the mother, and as a result destined, because he is anatomically a boy, to misapprehend the mother's utterance. His overattachment to the black velvet is itself an indication of the overly sensitive, overly observant nature of the sissy-boy. In attempting to remember the timing of this incident, he identifies this rather innocuous memory with "a terrifying event which I scarcely remember at all." Baldwin writes, "this may have been the same year that my father had me circumcised" (3). That he should "scarcely" remember the father's belated circumcision—I almost said castration—but fastens onto the mother's black velvet idea repeats the same rhetorical structure in which he reports the anecdote about the groping white Southerner as "an unbelieving shock" about which he has never written.

The violent alienation from black paternity, in this case the belated circumcision, tracks the same estrangement as the shock over the white patriarch's groping sexual violence. Paradoxically, the circumcision is performed on behalf of the father as an act of claiming another man's bastard son as his own. Baldwin's bastardy, always at the tip of his pen when he writes about himself autobiographically or fictively, is a factor of his sissified condition, and vice versa. We witness here a series of concentric circles, from the black father's circumcising household to the white patriarch's castrating Southland, and as he moves into each wider circle, he finds himself not in the center, nor merely on the periphery, but standing awkwardly out of place on the very circumference itself, on the line that demarcates inner belonging from outright alienation.

In case we miss this sissifying frame, Baldwin repeats it immediately in other ways in the opening paragraphs of *No Name in the Street*. "I may think I was five because I remember tugging at my mother's skirts once and watching her face while she was telling someone else that she was twenty-seven" (3). Then again in the next sentence: "This meant, for me, that she was virtually in the grave already, and I tugged a little harder at her skirts" (3). This position, tugging at the mother's skirts, is perhaps the most definitive early marker of sissiness, and portends from dominant society the incipience or threat of a homosexual disposition. Does being a momma's boy reduce or increase the killing dangers of the streets and backways of America? In some sense, it does both, for the momma's boy may find himself sequestered in libraries, museums, cinemas, and churches. When he does venture out, however, if he is to survive the killing streets, he must become as hard-assed as Little Richard, hardening the girlish swish into a swishing swagger that defies ridicule or violation. In the African American vernacular tradition, just as not every same-sexual act produces a faggot, not every swishing sissy is a punk waiting to be bashed.³¹

Baldwin repeats yet again in the next paragraph the skirt-tugging image, "and if I remember myself as tugging at my mother's skirts and staring up into her face, it was because I was so terrified of the man we called my father" (3). Then at the end of that same paragraph, he flourishes this series of sissy frames with this poignant coda:

I am apparently in my mother's arms, for I am staring at my father over my mother's shoulder, we are near the door; and my father smiles. This may be a memory, I think it is, but it may be a fantasy. One of the very last times I saw my father on his feet, I was staring at him over my mother's shoulder—she had come rushing into the room to separate us—and my father was not smiling and neither was I. (4)

There is much to be said about this climactic staging of Baldwin's sissy frame of reference, but I'll point out only this for now: as the mother mediates between sissy son and circumcising father, the boy's own perspective, even as he can no longer rest in her arms, is always a view over her shoulder—in this instance, not just metaphorically

speaking. It is also instructive that the final over-the-mother's-shoulder view of the father results from the mother's intervention in a fight between the two. Hugging the mother's skirts represents the sissy's destiny as a male who squeamishly avoids a fight. The young Baldwin's tussle with his father would have been a claim to legitimate manhood, a strong-arming aggression against being not just a bastard but a sissy bastard in his father's house. Like Little Richard, Baldwin understood that to be a sissy was not necessarily to be cowardly, despite dominant society's insistence on this equation.

Although the sissy's liminal temperament—always on the edge of things watching himself being watched—derives from the nature of the sexual danger that surrounds him, one must learn to see oneself as a sissy object in others' eyes just as one must learn to make a sissy the target of sexual assault. Baldwin, too, had to learn how to become the sissy that others insisted on seeing in him. How he develops this sissy self-awareness that he later cultivates into a sissy insurgency is far too complex to demonstrate here, but we can glimpse this sissy self-fashioning by briefly considering his relationship to the person whom he calls his "principal witness," the sissy avant-garde artist Beauford Delaney.³²

When Baldwin was fourteen, he went to Delaney's house and introduced himself. Not long after, Delaney, who had fallen in love with the sexually inexperienced Baldwin, painted a startling portrait of the youth. Delaney was himself a sissified man twenty years older than the youthful Baldwin; he had against the odds settled in segregated Greenwich Village, where he was constantly targeted both as a sissy and as a "nigger," and was beaten more than once by straight white boys out to make a point.³³ Despite his own outsider and marginal status, or perhaps because of it, Delaney became the mentor that Baldwin could not find in his native milieu of his father's house and church, and that would have been too dangerous to find on the street. Delaney rarely painted nudes, male or female, so it is particularly stunning and revealing that for his first portrait of Baldwin, "Dark Rapture," he chooses a nude.

There is so much to be said about this painting, but what I want to emphasize is that Delaney was teaching Baldwin how to see himself as a sissy, beautiful, black, and mysteriously but resistingly seductive. Baldwin claims that Delaney taught him how to see as an artist by urging him to look at a dirty pool of water while out on a walk together. It is only on the second and third looks that Baldwin begins to see a grease stain lining the face of the filthy pool, and within the stain a sensuous reflection of color and then eventually a dazzling reflection of the urban landscape. Similarly, Delaney, the black sissy-man looking at the black sissy-boy, trained Baldwin's eyes to see himself with a second, third, and fourth look . . . ad infinitum. In "Dark Rapture," Delaney pays tribute to the boy Baldwin by having him look back on us as our view of him is both coerced and blocked. His genitalia virtually blotted out by the shadows (no crude visual grope is this), Baldwin's sinewy body, splashed with sinuous color, draws the viewer's eye up the torso and to the face, where the light makes clear the oversized eyes focused on us watching him being beautifully rendered in oil. The painting captures a classic sissy posture, a pretty, naked boy posed as only a sexually alluring woman should be, arms relaxed, one leg bent and crossed under the other (crossed over would have been more masculine), his overshadowed genitalia as open and yet protected as the natural scene that frames his beguiling innocence. Placed on exhibit in one of Delaney's first gallery shows, the viewing of this portrait circulated among the artistic communities in New York, including the many white and black bohemians and avant-garde artists who visited Delaney's studio. As if to model his lesson in revisionary artistic looking, Delaney repainted Baldwin's portrait more than a dozen times between 1944 and the artist's death in 1979. When Baldwin poses for publicity photographs, he insists on reproducing this public sissy impersonation that he had learned from Delaney. In one girlish pose, with his legs up in the air, his ankles crossed ladylike, he stares out at us, rather than downward into the book that

symbolically engages his artist's attention. Such images do the dual work of making the sissy into the artist while insisting that the artist sees so presciently because of his sissified insight. By the 1950s, Baldwin had become the epitome of the sensitive artist whose insight derives from his sissified subjectivity as an estranged black spokesman, a cultural imaginary to which he self-consciously contributed. Carl Van Vechten photographed him in 1955 against a voluminous white canvas of velvety cloth (Fig. 4), a portrait that seems in dialogue with Irving Penn's famous 1948 photograph of Capote swamped in an overcoat (Fig. 5). Just as Capote's fey blondness is emphasized by the dark manly overcoat, so Baldwin's sissy blackness is hyped by the velvety white cloth.

Through verbal and visual figurations, this black sissy's liminal subject-position—in the black father's household but not of it, in the white patriarch's racist nation-state but not of it—affords him an unusual vantage point of sensitive observation. In a brilliant reading of the FBI files on Baldwin, Maurice Wallace has remarked on how Baldwin—the object of FBI and mass media surveillance—resisted this objectification of his person by unflinchingly gazing back at the camera. Those oversized eyes in a waifish dark body—a look that in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) he identifies with the blonde matinee idol Bette Davis—were clearly a source of embarrassment for Baldwin (7-8), but at the same time, because, as he writes in *The Devil*, “I have my mother's eyes” (7), his frog eyes embody for him the same comfort zone as that sissified place attached to his mother's skirts. These “ugly” frog eyes mark yet another way in which he experiences the sissy's out-of-gender-place in relation to his own person and within his father's household. As Wallace points out, however, those oversized eyes staring back at the camera constitute an ideological and material resistance to the Cold War regimes of racist, homophobic surveillance that followed him around within and beyond the American borders (133-46).

I want to tweak Wallace's reading a bit by suggesting that Baldwin's gazing back also frames the potential gender embarrassment of out-of-placeness as a daring act

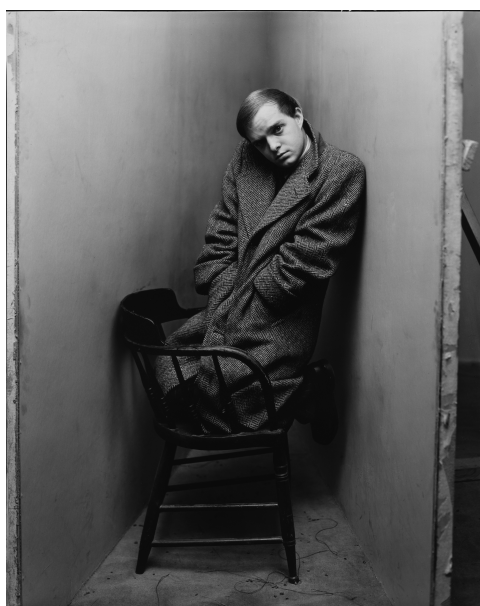


Fig. 4: Baldwin by photographer Carl Van Vechten (Gelatin silver print, 1955). Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; copyright © Carl Van Vechten Trust. With permission of the Trust.

Fig. 5: *Truman Capote* (1 of 4), New York, 1948. Photo by Irving Penn. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution / Art Resource, NY; copyright © by The Irving Penn Foundation.

of sissified insurgence. Returning to the groping passage of *No Name in the Street*, we can see this sissified insurgency at work. After exposing the true scandal of the white Southerner's groping gesture, Baldwin turns his (and our) gaze away from the white patriarch and onto the black castigated sons: "It was something like this that I began to see, watching black men in the South and watching white men watching them" (64). On the liminal circumference of that battle between the white man and the black, Baldwin stands watching the black men, and watching the white men watching the black men. In a society where it is a crime against nature to let the eyes linger too long on another man, a crime punishable with a fag-bashing, Baldwin flagrantly images himself with those malingering eyes watching men watching men across the embattled color-line. This trope is axiomatic of Baldwin's work.³⁴ Through his use of sissy insurgency, Baldwin radically revises Richard Wright's celebrated riposte to the Jim Crow regime.³⁵ Whereas in his 1945 semifictional autobiography *Black Boy*, Wright famously charts his way out of Jim Crow by learning how to use "words as weapons"—symbolic weapons more powerful than guns—Baldwin shifts the symbolic register from aggressive warfare to a defensive stance. We might say that Baldwin fights with his eyes, and at first this may seem like a totally inappropriate kind of warfare for a man to be waging with another man. If we remember that sizing up is an important strategy in manly sports like boxing, to look your opponent squarely in the eye before pummeling him, then we can recognize how Baldwin turns sissy alarm and passivity and the sissy propensity for the lingering look at other men into a mode of un/manly insurgency that—all at once—appropriates, admires, models, mocks, and subverts the heteronorm as it is anchored in racist patriarchal violations like lynching castration.

Although this eye-to-eye pattern of resistant observation marks Baldwin's own genius as a form of sissy heroism, it is also the case that Baldwin attributes a similar mode of heroism to the ordinary mass of black men who refused to be crushed by Jim Crow. Aware of the Jim Crow protocol that a black man should never look a white man straight in the eye, Baldwin in *No Name in the Street* records black men who, in the face of this emasculating protocol, developed an insistent way of being men that necessarily caught the wary eye of white men. Baldwin writes, "For that marvelously mocking, salty authority with which black men walked was dictated by the tacit and shared realization of the price each had paid to be able to walk at all" (64). Aware that Jim Crow displaces them from the heteronormative, these men, in Baldwin's observation, forge their own self-estranged manliness in a heroic manner. "So many of the black men I talked to in the South in those years," Baldwin writes, "were—I can find no other word for them—heroic. . . . Their heroism was to be found less in large things than in small ones, less in public than in private. . . . What impressed me was how they went about their daily tasks, in the teeth of the Southern terror" (66). To find a way to be brave men in little, everyday private acts identifies these men simultaneously with femininity (the private domestic sphere of minute duties) and misplaced manliness (the insistence on their masculine swagger on public streets). Like the sissy who displays his fierce resistance by flagrantly swishing down a public street, these Jim Crowed men insist on displaying their manliness despite the lethal cost that can be exacted if they take this swagger too far (in the lynching hand of castration).

We should not forget that Baldwin's person, his unadorned body, and his persona, the way he staged that body for public consumption, exposed him as a sissy in every public venue. Aware, furthermore, that this sissy façade always brought with it a rush to an assumption of homosexuality and its stigmatizing formulas, Baldwin stared back as the sissy that he had become, letting the stigma stick without stinging. This is why, when Dwight McBride in his important essay, "Can the Queen Speak," takes Baldwin to task for verbally assuming the position of a heterosexual man in order to speak on behalf of the race in his television interviews, we might contextualize

this by remembering that the body itself speaks, and sometimes says something quite different from what the mouth intones. If Baldwin sometimes voiced a heterosexual script—raging against the emasculation of black men by the Jim Crow regime—he as frequently, and as trenchantly as anyone I’ve ever encountered, also proffered the most devastating critique of the racist heteronorm in a wide range of genres. And he did this not only through his voice but also by allowing his sissified intelligence to be staged for the public eye through the exhibition of his out-of-gender person. As Baldwin wrote in the late essay “Here Be Dragons,”

we all exist, after all, and crucially, in the eye of the beholder. We all react to and, to whatever extent, become what that eye sees. . . . and so we move, in the vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others, on up or down the line, to the eye of one’s enemy or one’s friend or one’s lover.

It is virtually impossible to trust one’s human value without the collaboration or corroboration of that eye—which is to say that no one can live without it. (680)

Understanding that he and we could not escape that policing eye, Baldwin turned the gaze back—helping us to see eye to eye—forging the estranging perspective of a sissy insurgency that we only now are beginning to “see through a glass, darkly,” and which Baldwin would have us in time know, “face to face.”

1. See Stockton, esp. 149-76. Stockton usefully examines the shameful bottom not to argue for its radical political potential—as is the case with many others, including Bersani, but instead to investigate how value is produced in the relationship between particular subjectivities and tabooed but alluring quarters of the human body.

2. The extent to which the asshole as an erotic subject has remained taboo can be glimpsed from how long it took to overturn state sodomy laws within the U. S. despite increasing tolerance toward gay, lesbian, and transgender minorities. Such laws were enforced as recently as 1986, when the Supreme Court upheld in *Bowers v. Hardwick* Georgia’s right to criminalize private oral and anal sex between consenting adult men, a decision finally overturned in 2003 by *Lawrence v. Texas*. It is notable that such sodomy laws often proscribed private anal intercourse between married heterosexuals as well. For excellent critical analysis of these cases, see David A. J. Richards, *The Sodomy Cases: Bowers v. Hardwick and Lawrence v. Texas* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2009), and Eng 23-57.

3. See, for instance, *James Baldwin Now*, Dwight McBride, ed. (New York: New York UP, 1999); Roderick A. Ferguson, “Nightmares of the Heteronormative: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* versus *An American Dilemma*,” in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004), 82-109; and the three essays on Baldwin in the landmark anthology *Black Queer Studies*, E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, eds. (Durham: Duke UP, 2005): Dwight McBride, “Straight Black Studies: On African American Studies, James Baldwin, and Black Queer Studies” (68-89); Maurice O. Wallace, “On Being a Witness: Passion, Pedagogy, and the Legacy of James Baldwin” (276-86); and Mae G. Henderson, “James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*: Expatriation, ‘Racial Drag,’ and Homosexual Panic” (298-322).

4. See, for instance, Marlon B. Ross, “White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality,” in *Baldwin Now* 13-55; Ross, “Some Glances at the Black Fag: Race, Same-Sex Desire, and Cultural Belonging,” in *The Black Studies Reader*, Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 153-73; and Ross, “An Anatomy of the Straight Black Sissy as Theoretical Intervention,” *Forum for European Contributions to African American Studies* 16 (2007): 41-57.

5. For an infamous example of this, see Norman Mailer’s remarks on Baldwin in “Evaluations,” where he begins, “James Baldwin is too charming a writer to be major. If in *Notes of a Native Son* he has a sense of moral nuance which is one of the few modern guides to the sophistications of the ethos, even the best of his paragraphs are sprayed with perfume” (471).

6. I am adapting Mercer’s concept related to Black Art exhibition in postwar Britain—whereby a single black exhibition “was burdened with the role of making present that which had been rendered absent in the official versions of modernist art history” and “a single exhibition had to ‘stand for’ the totality of everything that could conceivably fall within the category of black art” (234).

7. Other African Americans who had graced the cover of *Time* before Baldwin include: Walter White (24 Jan. 1938), Joe Louis (29 Sept. 1941), Marian Anderson (30 Dec. 1946), Jackie Robinson (22 Sept. 1947), Thurgood Marshall (19 Sept. 1955), Duke Ellington (20 Aug. 1956), Harry Belafonte (2 Mar. 1959), Leontyne Price (10 Mar. 1961), and Cassius Clay (22 Mar. 1963). Martin Luther King, Jr. did not appear

Notes

on the cover until January 3, 1964, almost a year after Baldwin. That the previous cover figures focus, with the exception of White and Marshall, on athletes and music celebrities (classical and pop) tells us a great deal about the national discourse on the respectable, exceptional Negro during the later Jim Crow period. Other writers to be placed on the cover include Toni Morrison (19 Jan. 1998).

8. This tactic is highlighted when placed alongside the 1925 cover of Alain Locke's "New Negro" special issue of *Survey Graphic*, "Harlem Mecca of the New Negro," which bears the truncated head of the famed singer Roland Hayes as sketched by the German artist Winold Reiss (1886-1953), who also designed the cover with similar African geometries along the border.

9. This does not suggest that other artists did not use their public platform to speak on behalf of the race. One thinks of Paul Robeson and Lorraine Hansberry, for instance, as individuals who were able to perform this role effectively. However, neither of these was able to parlay their artistic success into so public an intermediating role.

10. A useful comparison would be with Bayard Rustin, the openly gay African American pacifist who was instrumental in the civil rights movement, and before that the World War II antiwar movement, but whose homosexuality often constrained the extent to which he was perceived as a racial spokesman by mass media despite his considerable skills as an orator and political activist. As D'Emilio has instructively documented, when Rustin's leadership role in planning the 1963 March on Washington was jeopardized, A. Philip Randolph and other African American leaders came to his support (326-57). Even so, he operated behind the scenes of the march, rather than out front as a spokesperson on behalf of the mass protest.

11. For an interpretation of this passage similar to Edelman's, see William J. Spurlin, "Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity: James Baldwin and the Identity Politics of Race and Sexuality," in *James Baldwin Now*, Dwight McBride, ed. (New York: New York UP, 1999), 105-06.

12. By "impersonation" here I want to suggest that one must, at least to some extent, learn how to look like, sound like, and behave like a sissy, and that one must also learn to spot these telltale signs in those purportedly performing such. That is, I want to emphasize how the sissy entails a persona, the personification of a gender identity distinct from but inextricably linked with that of the male homosexual. As impersonation, the sissy is always figured as excessive, exaggerated, inauthentically gendered as a male person out of his gender place. The irony is that not only Baldwin's use of it but also the sissy phenomenon in general, especially in African American cultural expression, bespeaks an authentic, if often pathetic, liminal gender position neither quite masculine enough nor quite feminine.

13. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin includes a review essay on André Gide's *Madeleine* (1951), a memoir about his relationship with his late wife, Madeleine Rondeaux; Baldwin's review, entitled "The Male Prison," was originally published under the title "Gide as Husband and Homosexual" in *The New Leader* (13 Dec. 1954). In that essay, Baldwin makes a rare but telling autobiographical aside in a parenthesis, where, in attacking Gide for being too disturbed in speaking of his own homosexuality, for not coming to terms with it, he obliquely implicates himself in the same trauma: "(For I believed at one time—rather oddly, considering the examples by which I was surrounded, to say nothing of the spectacle I myself presented—that people *did* 'get over' their earliest impressions and that 'coming to terms' with oneself simply demanded a slightly more protracted stiffening of the will)" ("Male Prison" 127).

14. In the anecdote, Baldwin more precisely focuses on the white Southerner's fixation on Baldwin's cock representing more the prospect of the white man's desire to become the penetrated hole (whether mouth or anus), a less vulnerable position than if, for instance, the man had groped Baldwin's behind.

15. See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 43-66; Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 30-39; and Eng 3-10.

16. For a thorough examination of closet tyranny, see Marlon B. Ross, "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm," in Johnson and Henderson 161-89.

17. I am, of course, referencing the concept of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron on cultural capital from *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Richard Nice, trans. (1965; London: Sage, 1977); and Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Richard Nice, trans. (1979; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), esp. 11-96.

18. Bayard Rustin becomes embroiled in this homophobic surveillance when he is arrested on charges of lewd vagrancy in Pasadena, California in 1953, when police catch him giving blowjobs to two men in the backseat of their car. See D'Emilio 191-92. For a vivid portrayal of the tactics and effects of the homosexual red scare on one enclave of elite white gay men, see Barry Werth's biography, *The Scarlet Professor: Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by Scandal* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

19. Corber's astute analysis of national security as a justification for homosexual purges nonetheless overlooks the historical likelihood that the *decrease* in official public discourse on homosexuality was accompanied by a spectacular *increase* in the visibility of actual homosexually identified people on America's city streets, as D'Emilio, Cuordileone, and others have suggested. In other words, the increasing visibility

of homosexuals in ordinary American life fueled the sociopolitical demand not only for purging them from official venues of power but also for excising their graphic representation in mass visual culture.

20. Another glaring instance of this conflation of the sissy and homosexual as a Cold War representation can be found in Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 1993).

21. As Cuordileone observes, when the homosexual Chambers brings down Alger Hiss as a communist spy, it is the perception of Hiss's sissy display—his “suave, well-coiffed, super-refined, urbane manner” (43), to quote Cuordileone—that seals his guilt. Posturing himself as a straight-from-the-hip shooter, Senator Joe McCarthy, the architect of Cold War hysteria, explicitly appeals to the structural link between the soft sissy as the harbinger of the subversive homosexual when he calls his Eastern, Ivy League liberal opponents “pretty boys” and taunts reporters with the quip: “If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you’ve got to be a Communist or a cocksucker” (Cuordileone 46-47).

22. Like the scandalous dust jacket photograph of the author that created as much excitement as the novel itself, the text is a phantasmagoric, gothic narrative of a socially isolated pubescent boy, Joel Knox Sansom, insecure in his maleness, and forebodingly, darkly lured by his middle-aged, effete, fat, male crossdressing cousin, Lee Randolph, who isolates him in order to ensnare him in a decadent, morbid mirroring relationship in which the boy, weakly willed, loses any chance at normal manhood, destined instead to become the useless, decorative nonman that Randolph has perfected. Not surprisingly, the character who offers the most hope of escape from the unmaning fate is the black maid, Zoo, whose experience of gang-rape unhinges her from any redemptive agency.

23. On the scandal created by the dust jacket photo, see Gerald Clarke, *Capote: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 158-61.

24. Race is a telling subtext in Capote's work, thus indicating how this similitude between him and Baldwin reverberates in Capote's constant self-conscious psychologizing and depoliticizing of racial, class, and sexual matters in books like the career-making *In Cold Blood* (1966) and the posthumous *Answered Prayers* (1987), the former turning literal murderers into seductively monstrous celebrities, the latter turning highbrow celebrities into archly unattractive metaphorical monsters.

25. Baldwin himself is the most famous case of such a circumspect sissy, who understands his unusual position as a successful breadwinner without wife and children as a racial obligation to provide and nurture siblings, nephews, nieces, cousins, and, indeed, complete strangers in trouble with white supremacy. His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), fictionalizes this sissy role of racial obligation in the figure of the protagonist John Grimes. The intensified sense of familial and racial obligation—amplifying the notion that to whom much is given, much is expected—might be seen as an overcompensating behavior resulting from social embarrassment at not conforming to the masculine and patriarchal dictates of marriage and procreation.

26. The original lyrics included these lines: “Tutti Frutti, good booty / If it don't fit, don't force it / You can grease it, make it easy.” On rewriting the song for a crossover market, see Charles White, *The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock* (New York: Harmony, 1984), 50-52, 55. David Kirby documents the explicitly queer content and audience for the original performances of the song, quoting Phil Walden, founder of Capricorn Records, upon first meeting Little Richard in 1955:

Little Richard just destroyed me. He was doing a lot of the songs that he later recorded, but off-color, like “Tutti Frutti / Good Booty / Miss Lucy is juicy / Miss Tight is all right / It ain't the ocean, it's the motion”—oh, all kinds of things. And he would wave to all the gay guys, all his “sisters” in the audience. (qtd. in Kirby 117)

27. It is worth noting that even though Baldwin's fictional black, man-loving men in *Another Country* (1962), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), and *Just Above My Head* (1979) could be seen as his own “stage” performance of same-sexuality, none of his homo- or bisexual men takes on the swishing sissy persona staged by Little Richard, or indeed by many ordinary swishes sashaying along the urban streets of black America in the decades before and after World War II. Like Bayard Rustin, who cultivated a clipped British-sounding accent, Baldwin performs a high-sissy act, one espousing high art in the cause of ideological warfare against racial oppression and sexual conformity.

28. Despite international fame that was as great or greater than that of the African American artists who undertook cultural ambassador missions to the Third World during the 1950s and '60s, Little Richard and Little Jimmy were totally unacceptable as black cultural ambassadors of the state; they were instead enemies of that state, as Baldwin's hefty FBI files attest. See Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004). It must be pointed out that sissies and homosexuals did serve as Third World cultural ambassadors for the state department. The operatic bass-baritone William Warfield, for instance, then the husband of famed soprano Leontyne Price, played Porgy with the 1952 State Department-sponsored tour of the George Gershwin opera, and he reputedly made more such tours as a cultural ambassador than any other solo artist.

29. Jones's 1968 poem "Black Art" captures this idea:

. . . Another negroleader
on the steps of the white house one
kneeling between the sheriff's thighs
negotiating coolly for his people. (303)

This image is aimed at Martin Luther King, Jr., imputing that his politics reduce him to Martin Luther Queen—a common attack on nonviolent resistance during the time. When Malcolm X attacks the 1963 children's crusade in Birmingham, Alabama, he attacks King in gender terms, saying "real men don't put their children on the firing line" (qtd. in Handler 9).

30. Eldridge Cleaver evasively attacks Baldwin's interracial homosexuality in an essay entitled "Notes on a Native Son," in *Soul on Ice* (New York: Laurel/Dell, 1968), 96-107. The notion of the black homosexual as doubly racially suspicious has been grippingly fictionalized in Darieck Scott's best-selling novel *Traitor to the Race* (New York: Plume, 1996), in which a black homosexual seeks to come to terms not only with homophobia in his community but also with the implications of his relationship with a white lover. Scott's novel updates Melvin Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms* (New York: Plume, 1992), which is itself a riff on Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Dell, 1956).

31. African American literature is replete, however, with black mothers who attempt to slap their little boys into hard manliness at the slightest indication of a sissy timidity. We all remember the famous scene in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* when the mother slaps Richard and tells him to go back into the streets and fight the black bullies, but do we remember the succeeding episode when the mother slaps him for daring to fight white boys? See Wright 16-18, 83.

32. The photographic images of Delaney and Baldwin can be uncannily similar in profile and posture. Although it might take the argument too far to suggest that Baldwin literally mimicked Delaney's sissy pose, it is not unreasonable to understand the young boy as having emulated his admiring and admired elder—down to the manner in which he chose to pose himself for a photograph. In this sense, we could say that Delaney was not only Baldwin's "principal witness," he was also his principal simulacrum.

33. On Delaney's early years in Greenwich Village, see David Leeming, *Amazing Grace: A Life of Beauford Delaney* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 71.

34. We see this dynamic also in the 1961 essay on his testy relationship with Norman Mailer, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," in James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial, 1961), 168-90.

35. Wright struggles hard to wrest manly weaponry out of his sensitive sissy relationship to the world in *Black Boy*. Although Wright frames the black man's Jim Crow status as emasculated in such postures as nervous laughter, downcast eyes, and a slouched gait, he reveals much when he pictures the young Richard fantasizing about taking revenge for his uncle's lynching by assuming the identity of an avenging black woman who hides a shotgun under the sheet that she pretends to carry for the purpose of covering the corpse of her lynched husband. Having gotten permission to take her husband's body, she exposes the gun under her sheets and kills four of the men responsible for her husband's lynching. See Wright 73-74. Ironically, the only incident of a real weapon fired against whites narrated in the autobiography focuses on a grieving woman, the rumor of whom "renders him sleepless for nights" (73), as Richard fantasizes modeling payback for his own grievances on the woman's action.

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