

“Next Time, the Fire in *Giovanni's Room*”

The Critical Reception of James Baldwin's Second Novel in the Black Press

By Rachel Corbman

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In February of 1950, the most prominent and widely distributed black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, published a supplely illustrated feature article that considered the history and future of African American literature. Penned by educator and scholar James W. Ivy, “Fifty Years of Progress in Literature” placed the then twenty-five year old James Baldwin on the vanguard of this literary tradition by listing him amongst the “novelists of promise” despite the fact that he had yet to publish a full length work of fiction.¹ Ivy’s premature attention to Baldwin’s work—in the context of an article concerned with the contours of literary and racial progress—is typical of the ways in which Baldwin’s rising literary star was engaged by the black press in the early 1950s. Almost universally hailed as a “brilliant young Negro writer,” these early notices implicitly or explicitly celebrated Baldwin’s nascent literary career in concert with the political and ideological commitments of the emergent Civil Rights Movement.² Baldwin’s tenure as a critical darling of the black press, however, came to a head six short years later with the publication of his controversial second novel, *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Set in the Parisian gay underworld and featuring an all-white cast of characters, *Giovanni's Room* was initially ignored and, later, frequently satirized in the black press throughout the late 1950s and into the 1960s.

In this paper I will build upon the work that historians like Gerald Horne and Penny Von Eschen have done in identifying the black press as the primary vehicle through which black intellectuals communicated amongst themselves and with their black middle and working class

audiences.³ Specifically, I aim to closely read articles printed in a range of black newspapers and magazines (e.g. *The Atlanta World Daily*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The New York Amsterdam News*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, *Jet*, and *Ebony*) in order to bring into sharper focus the ways in which a unique cluster of sociopolitical forces—including the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the birth of the modern concept of homosexuality—caused the black press to amplify its vehement and vocal opposition to homosexuality at the same historical moment that James Baldwin published *Giovanni's Room*.

This paper further intends to intervene within the existent body of scholarship that considers the critical reception of *Giovanni's Room*. Indeed, concurrent with the establishment of Gay/Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory as legitimate fields of academic inquiry, for the past twenty years there has been a rapidly growing interest in James Baldwin's second novel, which has resulted in numerous analyses of its reception. However, unlike my project, the vast majority of this work either: (1) exclusively hones in on articles written by white writers for mainstream publications; or (2) subsumes a discussion of articles published in black newspapers and magazines into a larger analysis of the novel's reception in general without acknowledging the specificity of the black press as a discourse. One article that is characteristic of this first trend is Douglas Field's "Passing as a Cold War Novel: Anxiety and Assimilation in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*" (2006), which closely examines a diverse set of reviews written by (white) critics in order to demonstrate the ways in which the text exasperated "key Cold War anxieties about race and homosexuality."⁴ On the other hand, Emmanuel Nelson's concise and in many ways helpful overview of this subject, "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction" (1991), could be considered exemplary of the latter tendency. In this article, Nelson draws from a wide range of critical engagements with Baldwin's fiction, including Ivy's review of *Giovanni's Room* in *The Crisis*, which I will treat at length later in my paper. While Nelson notes that this review is from "the respected and often politically progressive Black Journal, *The Crisis*," he neither incisively probes the importance of this context nor mentions Ivy's historic support of (and social and professional relationship to) Baldwin.⁵

Despite my shift in focus, this paper is nevertheless indebted to the exhaustive research and interpretative insights of this earlier work. My project is additionally assisted by the writings of a handful of literary critics who have already charted alternatives to these critical trends. For example, Marlon Ross's "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality" (1999) juxtaposes the "cautiously positive" immediate reception of *Giovanni's Room* in the mainstream press against the longstanding tendency of practitioners of African American literary and cultural studies

to “alternatively [dismiss or ignore], stumblingly [acknowledge or viciously attack]” *Giovanni's Room*.⁶ This paper, however, is distinct in its *exclusive* centering of the critical reception of this novel in the as yet under-explored black press as a point of entry into larger questions concerning race, gender, and sexuality in American culture in the 1950s and early 1960s. To structure this analysis, I will preface with a brief history of the black press. The majority of my paper will, then, move chronologically through my time frame.

I. A History of the Black Press

On March 16, 1827, the first volume of the pathbreaking but short-lived weekly newspaper *Freedom's Journal* appeared in New York City. As editors Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm eloquently explained:

In presenting our first number to our patrons, we feel all the diffidence of persons entering upon a new and untried line of business. But a moment's reflection upon the noble objects, which we have in view by the publication of this Journal; the expediency of its appearance at this time, when so many schemes are in action concerning our people- encourage us to come boldly before an enlightened public.⁷

Simultaneously critical of the racism of the mainstream press and not willing to be spoken for by white abolitionists, the publication of *Freedom's Journal* marked the first occasion in which individual (free, Northern, educated, male) blacks in this country were able to harness the power of the press to advance pressing political causes and, just as importantly, participate in the construction of a collective “African American community”—appearing, in the above quoted passage, under the sign of “our people.”⁸

Indeed, much like Benedict Anderson's contention that newspapers facilitated the formation of the “imagined communities” of nations, black newspapers could be said to anchor the relationship of individual African American men and women to the larger “nation within a nation” of the “African American community.” In Anderson's helpful formulation, the construction of this community happens in the moment when “the newspaper reader observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.”⁹ Echoing this sentiment, the commentators featured in a PBS documentary on the history of the black press impress upon the viewer the importance of this discourse in creating and stabilizing the “African American community” from the antebellum era and into the twentieth century. Journalist and professor Phyllis

Garland, for example, suggested that black newspapers and magazines constituted a “separate world” in which black readers could be “liberated from images, inferiorities that prevailed, that permeated, [and] were reinforced by what was taught in schools or shown in mainstream newspapers or in the movies. . . . They also gave them the opportunity to establish their own identity, and to tell each other what they thought of themselves separate from the mainstream.”¹⁰

Following the lead of *Freedom's Journal*, two dozen black newspapers managed to appear before the Civil War. However, it was not until the postbellum era that the number of black newspapers began to rapidly soar. Moreover, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, a remarkable 275 black newspapers were simultaneously in print with a combined readership of over a half million. Contributing heavily to the readership statistics of black newspapers was the self-proclaimed “world's greatest weekly” *The Chicago Defender*. Formed in 1905 as an indirect result of the racial barriers that prevented the founder, Robert Abbott, from setting up a law practice, *The Chicago Defender* boasted a circulation of 200,000 at its height. In this same era, readership also reached upwards of 100,000 for the monthly published magazine, *The Crisis*, which was founded and initially edited by W.E.B. Du Bois on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

While the circulation of *The Crisis* substantially dropped under Roy Wilkins's leadership during the Great Depression, black newspapers, on the other hand, reached the height of their circulation and influence in the 1930s. Along with *The Chicago Defender*, the most important black newspapers during this time included the *Atlanta Daily World*, *The New York Amsterdam News*, and *The Pittsburgh Courier*. The latter, in particular, is notable for its high production value and sparkling cohort of contributing writers, which included, at one time or another, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey.

In sharp contrast, the 1940s crucially tested the strength of the black press. Against the backdrop of the Second World War, the standing director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, initiated a campaign against the black press and its supposed seditious activity. Pivoting Hoover's objections was what *The Pittsburgh Courier* coined the “Double-V” campaign, which linked the domestic fight against racism with an international fight against fascism and specifically contended that African American men fighting abroad deserved citizenship rights back home. The black press, however, evaded formal censor through an agreement between the Attorney General Francis Biddle and Robert Abbott's nephew John Sengstacke, who had taken over as editor of *The Chicago Defender* after

Abbott's death and was also the president of the newly founded National Negro Publishers Association. The agreement, in short, promised that rhetoric would be toned down for the duration of the war effort in return for greater access to federal agencies.¹¹ Despite this, journalism historian Patrick Washburn and others have suggested that the war time discourse in the black press was a major catalyst for what came to be known as the black Civil Rights Movement.¹² And it is here, in this context, that the young, promising writer James Baldwin makes his grand entrance into our story.

II. Enter James Baldwin

In 1953, three years after James W. Ivy's "Fifty Years of Progress in Literature," James Baldwin finally managed to publish his debut novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Released by Alfred A. Knopf, Baldwin's sweeping multigenerational story of an African American family was immediately and almost universally championed by all the leading black newspapers and magazines as a text of great literary and historical importance, which proved that "Mr. Baldwin may well develop into a more accurate delineator of Negro life than many more-touted authors one could name."¹³ In fact, in my research, the sole exception to this rule is Lester Granger's column for *New York Amsterdam News*, in which he noted that Baldwin's novel "though it was hailed by many critics . . . left me cold."¹⁴ James Baldwin, for his part, had already publicly declared his opinion of *The Amsterdam* in a 1948 essay published in *Commentary*, writing that "the bestselling Negro newspaper, I believe, is [*The Amsterdam*], which is also the worst."¹⁵ This jab, as we shall see, may well have haunted Baldwin for years to come.

The *New York Amsterdam News* aside, Baldwin's most ardent early supporters included: the Reverend D. Edward Wells for *The Pittsburgh Courier*; Gertrude Martin and Langston Hughes in their respective columns for *The Chicago Defender*; and of course, the newly named lead editor of *The Crisis*, James Ivy. For example, Gertrude Martin—the wife of "the Godfather of Black Politics" Louis Martin and an important figure in black journalism in her own right—mentioned Baldwin in her weekly book review column a staggering seven times in barely more than the span of a year, beginning on June 13, 1953 and ending on November 6, 1954. Her attention to Baldwin's writing included standalone reviews of two of Baldwin's essays that would later be collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (i.e. "Stranger in the Village" and "Paris Letter: A Question of Identity") as well as a special holiday wish that Baldwin would write more books of the "same quality" as *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.¹⁶ At the beginning of 1955, Gertrude Martin turned over her book review duties at *The*

Chicago Defender to the pioneering female editor Audrey Weaver. It is, therefore, not a matter of public record whether Martin's support of Baldwin weathered the controversy engendered by his second novel, but the reaction of her colleagues in the black press decisively suggests otherwise.

On October 13, 1953, *The Pittsburgh Courier* reported that "Mr. Baldwin is now living abroad and working on a second novel."¹⁷ This second novel would, of course, go on to become *Giovanni's Room*. Remarkably, however, this is the first and last time *Giovanni's Room* was referred to in *The Pittsburgh Courier* until a full decade later in 1963.¹⁸ This extended silence is impossible to reconcile with the critical attention that was generously heaped on Baldwin from 1953 until 1955 without considering the content of *Giovanni's Room* in relation to the context in which it was published.

In a particularly bold and unpredictable move, Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* is a dramatic departure from *Go Tell it on the Mountain* both in terms of style and theme. Unlike his first novel, *Giovanni's Room* is a first person narrative from the perspective of a handsome, wealthy, and white American expatriate in France. The novel opens with the narrator, David, standing at the window of a rented house in the South of France, drunkenly musing about the events leading up to what he cryptically refers to as "the most terrible morning of my life."¹⁹ Gradually, it is revealed that Giovanni—a bartender with whom David had a short but intense affair with in Paris—is scheduled to be executed the coming day. The bulk of the novel is, then, comprised of David's intricately woven recollections of his time in Paris and, specifically, his relationship to and eventual abandonment of Giovanni. Ultimately, the novel tells a simple story that Baldwin uses to elegantly gesture towards larger themes, such as Americaness, whiteness, sexuality, and, most importantly, love.

Prior to *Giovanni's Room's* publication with Dial Press, there was a general consensus in the publishing world that the book would prove detrimental to Baldwin's career. In fact, according to Baldwin's biographer Fern Marja Eckman, *Giovanni's Room* was initially rejected by numerous publishers including Knopf, and Baldwin was told that these rejections were "for his own good, really, since publication would surely 'wreck' his career."²⁰ In Baldwin's words: "They said I would—I was a *Negro* writer and I would reach a very special audience. . . . And I would be dead if I alienated that audience. That, in effect, nobody would accept that book—coming from me. . . . My agent told me to *burn* it."²¹

While Baldwin does not clarify whether the perceived unacceptability of his novel was a matter of his overt handling of homosexuality or his lack of black characters, in analyzing the black press's collective discomfort with *Giovanni's Room*, I argue that these features must be seen as

complexly interwoven. That being said, it is completely possible that one of these factors might take precedence over the other for individual writers associated with the black press. Langston Hughes, for example, had originally been a great supporter of Baldwin, highly recommending both *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and Baldwin's "serious, provocative, and beautifully written essays" to the readers of his column for the *Chicago Defender*.²² However, although Hughes never positively or negatively acknowledged *Giovanni's Room* in his column, we can get a glimpse of his take on it from a personal letter to fellow poet Arna Bontemps, which states: "Integration is going to RUIN Negro business—as it apparently threatened to ruin the finest young writer of fiction [Baldwin] in the race."²³ In considering Hughes's implied uneasiness with *Giovanni's Room*'s all-white cast of characters in conjunction with the presence of homosexual themes in some of Hughes's fictional and nonfictional writings, it is perhaps reasonable to speculate that Hughes was much less concerned with the homoerotic underpinnings of Baldwin's novel than he was with its symbolic politics of "integration."

On the other end of the spectrum, James Ivy was consistent and vocal in his defense of black authors's use of white characters, suggesting that this was inevitable if African American literature was to be mainstreamed into a larger American tradition. Not surprisingly, then, in his review of *Giovanni's Room* for *The Crisis*, Ivy elides mention of the race of the "American expatriate" in the novel.²⁴ However, Ivy is merciless in his handling of Baldwin's decision to tackle the "scabrous subject of homosexual love."²⁵ Despite acknowledging the brilliance of Baldwin's command of language, Ivy's review concludes by lamenting that "frustration, despair, and death are usually tragic, but in *Giovanni's Room* where these elements are served up in a homosexual romance they strike the reader as incongruous and therefore crudely comic rather than tragic."²⁶

Notably, in the same year that this review was published, Ivy and Baldwin both attended the Congress of Negro-African Writers and Artists in Paris (*Congrès des écrivains et artistes noirs*), where Ivy was a delegate and Baldwin a reporter. However, although it is clear that they were professionally and socially acquainted, it is impossible to know whether Ivy was aware of Baldwin's (homo)sexuality at the time. Regardless, Ivy's defensive argument that Baldwin was misdirecting his talents by focusing on what should be an irrelevant subject is striking and perhaps speaks to a larger sense of homosexuality being somehow incompatible with the "progress" of African Americans in the United States during the mid-twentieth century.

Historian Thaddeus Russell's "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality" (2008) is useful in fleshing out this argument. In this article, Russell makes a compelling case that the

ascendancy of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s brought with it a rigid set of family values that worked to displace the black working class's historic openness to nontraditional familial structures and sexual practices. Appropriately enough, Russell relies heavily on articles printed in black newspapers and magazines as source material to make his case. It is not a coincidence, Russell argues, that “in the same year the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Brown [v. Board of Education]*, *Ebony* stopped publishing articles about homosexuality and the black newspapers in Detroit, New York, and Chicago ended their coverage of drag shows.”²⁷

The most convincing example that Russell provides in his article is the dramatic change in the black press's once positive reportage of the lives and activities of a number of nonconventional, flamboyant ministers, including Sweet Daddy Grace and Prophet Jones. Russell contends that Harlem politician and Pastor Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s blistering attack on the alleged “sexual depravity” among black preachers in his 1951 article for *Ebony* magazine, “Sex in the Church,” can be seen as a turning point in this coverage. By positioning the article as a paradigm-shifting moment, Russell demonstrates how Powell Jr.'s eventual election as a U.S. congressman symbolically solidified the vexing entanglement of mainstream black politics, black (heterosexual) masculinity, and homophobia.

However, it is important to note that the rising anxiety about “homosexuality” in the black press was not necessarily a foreseeable result of this larger turn towards heteronormative values. Here, a brief history of the evolution of the modern notion of “homosexuality” and, by extension, “heterosexuality” is necessary. In what has become perhaps the most quoted passage from the routinely referenced *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Michel Foucault suggests that “we must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized.”²⁸ Foucault, then, dates the birth of the “homosexual species” to the publication of German sexologist Karl Westphal's article on “contrary sexual sensations” in 1870. Significantly, however, Westphal defined “contrary sexual sensations” or, as it was later translated—“sexual inversion”—as an inborn reversal of the role traditionally assigned to one's sex—a concept that, in effect, messily overlaps modern notions of “homosexuality,” “cross dressing,” “transsexuality,” “transgenderism,” and perhaps “intersexuality.”²⁹ In an important interventionist move, trans theorist Jay Prosser has convincingly argued that the tendency among critics of sexology to read inversion vis-à-vis homosexuality (*à la Foucault*) skews the fact that early sexologists shared much more in common with contemporary trans scholars in their emphasis on cross-gender identification rather than sex object choice. “The reading of sexual inversion as about

homosexuality is profoundly ironic,” Prosser writes. “As lesbian and gay commentary itself often evidences, the ‘heterosexist’ paradigms of sexual inversion, and above all sexology’s medicalization of transgender in the body of the invert, have not fitted easily with the homosexual subject.”³⁰

Furthermore, according to leading gay historian George Chauncey, it was not until sometime in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s that the now-conventional divide between a “heterosexual” and “homosexual” *orientation* emerged and, eventually, overwhelmed the definitional categories that late-nineteenth-century sexology instituted.³¹ Without question, a major factor in this shift was the publication of Indiana University professor Alfred Kinsey’s reports on male and female sexual behavior in 1948 and 1953, respectively. In these bestselling studies, Kinsey famously asserted the prevalence of homosexuality and also significantly dismissed the standard assumption that homosexuals are easily recognizable by their gender presentation (i.e. appearance, mannerisms, style of dress, etc.). While Kinsey’s report aimed to disarm prejudicial stances against homosexuality, according to Douglas Field, “his report in fact contributed to a national homosexual panic.”³²

Published at the height of this panic, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* could be said to occupy a liminal position within this “transition from one sexual regime to the next.”³³ This is most clearly demonstrated in a close examination of the ways in which the novel’s narrator distinguishes himself from the “disgusting band of fairies” and “silly old queen[s]” who populate Parisian gay bars.³⁴ Throughout the text, the narrator ruthlessly polices the division of “normal” masculine men (himself included) and effeminate men—a binary that is consistent with the means through which gender and sexuality were understood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, at the same time, a pressure is subtly exerted on this division. For example, in a discussion of *les folles* (which is French slang for an effeminate gay man, similar to the English word “queen,” and closely related to *grande folle* or drag queen) the narrator presents the following analogy: “I confess that [their] utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomach’s. They might not mind so much if the monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings.”³⁵ If we follow the logic of this analogy, the narrator ostensibly maintains a distinction between masculine gay men (humans) and queens (monkeys), but also opens up the possibility that there might be a “grotesque resemblance” between the two. While it is certainly possible to read this as internalized homophobia on the part of either Baldwin or his narrator, it is perhaps more intriguing to think about the ways in which the narrator’s hatred of effeminate men only appears inconsistent with his homosexual desire if sexual

preference is privileged over gender presentation as the means through which sexuality and gender are understood.

In other words, the narrator's legibility as a homosexual character for readers in 1956 had everything to do with the new ways of thinking about homosexuals and heterosexuality that coalesced during this epoch. Furthermore, suddenly more so than medical discourses, mass culture—including newspapers, magazines, books, movies, and, increasingly, television—became the operative means of proliferating knowledge about “homosexuals.” For readers of the black press, in particular, this information was further tailored to suit the overtly stated or silently presupposed differences between white and black Americans. For example, in their coverage of the second Kinsey report in 1953, *The Atlanta World Daily* and *The Pittsburgh Courier* were quick to point out that “no Negro interviewers were used in the final statistics. . . . The study applies only to white women.”³⁶ Moreover, in J.A. Rogers's column for *The Courier*, the historian sharply discourages African Americans from ever participating in studies similar to those conducted by Kinsey, which Rogers's article excessively likens to *Mein Kampf* in its virulent crucifixion of a whole human group.³⁷

Of all the black newspapers and magazines in print during this era, *The Chicago Defender* expended the most energy covering homosexuality. For instance, in a six part series, printed in installments from February 9 to March 9, 1957, the writer Alfred Duckett delineated, in his words, “certain basic truths about homosexuality and homosexuals.”³⁸ Most known today as a speech writer for Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Duckett's “Third Sex” series considers, in the following order: (1) the Bible's position on homosexuality; (2) the historical presence of homosexuals; (3) the supposed role prisons play in perpetuating homosexuality; (4) the existence of lesbianism; and, finally, (5) the Kinsey report. Here it is significant that Duckett's analysis of homosexuality is initiated with a discussion of the Bible because, as compared to other ostensibly secular discourses in America, the black press was perhaps the most reliant on homophobic (mis)readings of the Bible in its discussion of homosexuality. This opens up a set of thorny issues concerning the much written about spread of theologically-driven homophobia by the black church. However, following Kelly Brown Douglas's suggestion that it would be a mistake to construe the existence of a monolithic black church community,³⁹ it is also important to notice the ways in which Duckett's Biblical analysis is distinct from the writings of, for example, Powell Jr. in its approach to the Bible as both “the Greatest Book ever written” as well as a historical document that “illustrates the undeniable fact that, from the dawn of known history, there have not only been Adams and Eves on this earth—but

also Mr. Miss and Mrs. Inbetween—the people who emotionally, psychologically, and sexually rebelled against the respected cliché that ‘for every man there’s a woman’ and vice versa.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, in the above quoted passage and throughout the “Third Sex” series, Duckett walks a fine line between presenting genuinely well-researched articles that profess (albeit problematic) concern for so-called homosexual “victims” while simultaneously echoing the sensationalist rhetoric of the national discourse on homosexuality.⁴¹ It is notable, in this context, that Duckett nearly completely avoids specifically considering black homosexuals. (The sole exception is his brief discussion of the always-fascinating blues singer Gladys Bentley.) More still, by peppering his account with references to canonical white writers, philosophers, and historic figures—such as Plato, Shakespeare, Napoleon, Voltaire, Wilde, Whitman, Proust, and, yes, Hitler—Duckett’s patronizing attitude towards homosexuals and homosexuality begins to morph into a larger critique of white Western culture. In this cleverly warped view, the homosexuality that Duckett imagines as endemic to white Western culture is conflated with anti-black racism and white male supremacy. So that, in these articles, homosexuality is construed to present a potential threat to black men (Duckett is less concerned with black women), which is symbolically embodied in Duckett’s discussion of the tragic prison rape of one of the “Scottoboro Boys”, Haywood Patterson.

Duckett’s strategic avoidance of black male homosexuality is prototypical of high-brow contributions to this discourse during the 1950s. However, this topic was frequent fodder for lower-brow publications. In Corey Jarrell’s blogged piece “Derelicts, Deviants and Black Homosexualities: 1950s’s *Jet* Magazine,” for example, the historian uncovers and catalogues *Jet*’s scurrilous treatment of black homosexuals and homosexuality during this era. Founded in 1951 by black magazine mogul John H. Johnson as a more compact and easier to read alternative to *Negro Digest/Black World* or *Ebony*, *Jet* magazine included four full-length feature articles on black homosexuals or homosexuality between the years of 1951 and 1954 (two were about lesbianism). In a 1954 article, which is particularly relevant to this analysis, *Jet* magazine disparagingly discussed Carlett Angainlee Brown’s early attempts to have a (MTF) sex change operation alongside the pending morals charges against political advisor Bayard Rustin, before ambiguously reporting that “prominent Negroes whose strange sex lives are whispered conversation [include] a celebrated writer, a successful actor, a noted educator, two members of a nationally known quartet, a West Coast newspaperman, a classical pianist, a late boxing champion, several male choreographers and a now-deceased composer.”⁴²

ARE
? ? ? ? ?
HOMOSEXUALS
BECOMING
RESPECTABLE?

One of the best kept secrets on the campus of a southern Negro college was that a noted genius was overly fond of young boys and to protect the scientist's reputation he



Charles Brown (c.), an outspoken sex deviate, made no secret of his desire to have a sex-changing operation, marry a GI.

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Jet's coverage of Carlett Angainlee (nee Charlie) Brown (from "ARE HOMOSEXUALS BECOMING RESPECTABLE???????" *Jet Magazine*, April 1954)

If we are to take seriously *Jet's* claim that there were rumors surrounding the sexuality of "a celebrated black author" (and it is unclear if we *should* take this seriously) we might suppose that *Jet* was referencing either James Baldwin or perhaps Langston Hughes. If *Jet* was in fact referencing Baldwin, this would not be the last time that the black press snidely implied Baldwin's homosexuality. Indeed, as we shall see, throughout the 1960s, the black press routinely deployed key homophobic tropes in order to discredit Baldwin and his writing, particularly—and this is significant—when it was perceived as though Baldwin was being positioned as the "voice" of the "African American community."

III. James Baldwin in Another Decade

In the early 1960s, and especially after the publication of his bestselling polemic *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin was no longer simply an important writer on the literary scene; he was a full-fledged celebrity. No longer able to ignore Baldwin, black newspapers and magazines resumed their coverage of him and his writing. While this press was never exclusively negative, my paper will focus on two interpretively rich examples of bad press that directly or indirectly reference Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* as scaffolding for larger critiques of Baldwin's national fame and influence.

The first example was prompted by James Baldwin's publication of a poignant and controversial essay, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," in the July 1960 issue of the men's magazine, *Esquire*. In this essay, Baldwin uses the collective (plural first person "we") and immediate (present tense) voice in order to expose the destitute conditions of the upper reaches of Manhattan. Almost in passing, he mentions that "Harlem got its first private project, Riverton—which is now, naturally, a slum."⁴³ In a speedy response, Harlem's *New York Amsterdam News* (which, of course, was never Baldwin's biggest fan) indicted Baldwin in two separate columns of their June 18 issue. This public outcry, in short, eventually resulted in a halfhearted retraction of the comment in Baldwin's second essay collection, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1960). "The inhabitants of Riverton were much embittered by this description," he explains.⁴⁴

Significantly, both anonymously authored columns in *The Amsterdam* indirectly reference *Giovanni's Room* by stating that "Baldwin probably is best known in Harlem as the author of a book on homosexuals in Rome" and "we only know him as a man who once wrote a book filled with trash about the sex life of homosexuals in Rome," respectively.⁴⁵ It is debatable if this (mis)representation of Baldwin's book on homosexuals in *Paris* is genuinely a mistake or a conceit that further signal(s) the writer or writers's angry disregard for *Giovanni's Room*. What is, however, evident is that Baldwin's authority to speak for or about Harlem is questioned on the basis of what should be an extraneous fact—that he also wrote about homosexuals in Europe. These articles, in other words, extend the type of thinking that was evident in the earlier writings of Powel Jr., Ivy, and Duckett, in that, homosexuality is once again imagined to be at odds with blackness in general and black masculinity in particular. However, there are significant differences both in the shorthanded way in which this incompatibility is suggested as well as the writer's or writers's vitriol, which far surpasses the comparably tame homophobia of the previous decade.

It is important to view this change of rhetoric in relation to the emerging Black Nationalist movement, which was at the time beginning to influence black intellectual thought and, by

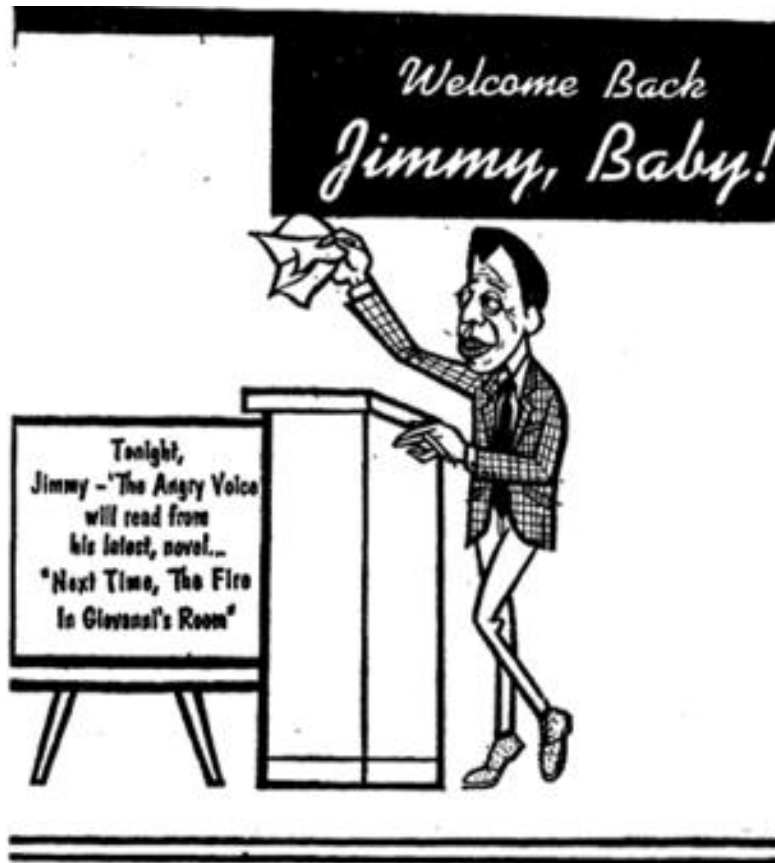
extension, the content and tone of black magazines and newspapers. The central defining characteristics of this complex and paradigm-shifting movement were: first, its revival of a politics of separationism rather than integration and, second, its emphasis on the cultural heritage of black people, particularly as this relates to their African roots. Furthermore, dating at least as far back as Michele Wallace's 1976 article "Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist Search for Sisterhood," feminist commentators have adeptly argued that this type of thinking tended to rely heavily on strictly scripted gender roles that presupposed heterosexuality. Wallace writes: "Young black female friends of mine were dropping out of school because their boyfriends had convinced them that it was 'not correct' or 'counterrevolutionary' to strive to do anything but have babies and clean house. 'Help the brother get his thing together,' they were told."⁴⁶ While Wallace and other black feminists focused their critical energies on the ways in which these strictly defined gender roles impacted women, more recent writings have built upon this critique in order to begin to address the tenuous position of gay black men in this cultural climate. An early example is filmmaker and activist Marlon Riggs's 1991 essay "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen," which cleverly and appropriately borrows part of its title from Wallace's infamous book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979). Riggs writes:

I am a Negro faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. My life is for play. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, "Afrocentric" black man is resolutely heterosexual, not *even* bisexual. Hence, I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value; indeed, it's a testament to weakness passivity, the absence of real guts—balls. Hence, I remain a sissy, punk, faggot.

Riggs memorably concludes: "I cannot be a black gay man because by the tenets of black macho, black gay man is a triple negation."⁴⁷

Four years after the Riverton fiasco, a political cartoon in *The Chicago Defender* illustrates what Riggs would refer to as James Baldwin's "triple negation" as a gay black man by the black press. Printed at the height of Baldwin's celebrity, the loaded cartoon depicts Baldwin waving a handkerchief from behind a podium, his slight frame and effeminate characteristics exaggerated. To Baldwin's right, a sign announces: "Tonight, Jimmy—"The Angry Voice' will read from his latest novel . . . 'Next Time, the Fire in Giovanni's Room.'" The caption (which is regrettably illegible in my reproduction) reads:

This is James the writer. . . . He just came back from Europe to help lead you...to Giovanni's pad! Isn't that wonderful? He told some black children, at his alma mater, that they should be proud of slavery and forget about their African past. . . . Is that supposed to be inspiring? That's so ridiculous, that he sounds funny. Don't you think he's funny! . . . Color him funny, for days.⁴⁸



This is James the writer. . . . He just came back from Europe to help lead you. . . . to Giovanni's pad! Isn't that wonderful? He told some black children, at his old alma mater, that they should be proud of slavery and forget about their African past. . . . Is that supposed to be inspiring? That's so ridiculous, that he sounds funny. Don't you think he's funny? . . . I think he's funny! . . . Color him funny, for days!

“Color Him Funny”, Display Ad 23 (No Title), *Chicago Defender*, March 16, 1964

Needless to say, the writer is using the word “funny” because it was a popular euphemism for “gay.” More subtly, however, it is Baldwin's “ridiculous” rejection of Africa that makes him “sound funny.” When we stop to think about it, the ease of this transfer is truly remarkable; and it would not be possible without the culturally ingrained connection between Afrocentric thought and

a particular type of black masculinity that, in the manner in which Riggs so eloquently described, does not allow for a gay black masculinity.

However, it is of further significance that the above featured examples are prompted by the concern that Baldwin's celebrity and access to mainstream media outlets enabled him to mold the popular discourse around race and racism in this country. This adds an important layer of complexity to this analysis. There is not an easy answer to the question of *how* and *why* Baldwin's star emerged at a moment in which the nation was so virulently homophobic and, moreover, black intellectual thought was moving in a masculinist, militant, and Afrocentric direction that conflicted with Baldwin's liberal, progressive, and humanist political philosophy. The difficulty of this question lies in the fact that it necessitates a radical reconfiguration of the ways in which we construct and compartmentalize overly simplistic narratives of gay/lesbian and African American histories and, more broadly, how we engage the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in our country's past as well as today.

This paper has been my attempt to begin to open up these sorts of questions. Using the reception of *Giovanni's Room* in the black press as a point of entry, this paper has suggestively traced the continuities and ruptures that characterize the evolution of black intellectual thought from abolitionism to Black Nationalism. Focusing primarily on a fifteen year span (1950-1965), I have demonstrated the reciprocal relationship between black intellectual thought and the black press. Moreover, I have proven that this history must be viewed alongside contemporaneous events and phenomena, specifically, in this paper, the birth of modern homosexuality. In our contemporary and apparently post-racial context, we can certainly identify traces of the (re)produced dualism between homosexuality and blackness upon which my paper has centered. Particularly ripe for analysis is the mainstream press's attentive coverage of seemingly any example of homophobia in the "African American community," including the ubiquitous reports of the percentage of black voters who voted for California's Proposition 8 (as ascertained via incredibly unreliable exit polling) and, more recently, black comedian Tracy Morgan's "joke" that he would "pull out a knife and stab" his son if he came out as gay.⁴⁹ Without excusing any manifestation of homophobic or racist prejudice, sensitive attention to this dualism reveals the ways in which a set of discourses work to reify "African American" and "gay" as discrete and easily manageable categories. Even more importantly, any attempt to engage the socially and discursively constructed aspects of race, gender, and sexuality

returns us to the overarching concern of much of Baldwin's writing: his attempt to imagine a world in which we all can be freer.

Notes

¹ James W. Ivy, "Fifty Years of Progress in Literature," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 11, 1950, 3.

² "Author Pens For Haper's," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 10, 1953, 9.

³ Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997), 8.

⁴ Douglas Field, "Passing as a Cold War Novel: Anxiety and Assimilation in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*," *American Cold War Culture*. Ed. Douglas Field. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 89.

⁵ Emmanuel Nelson, "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction," *Journal of American Culture* 14, no. 3 (1991), 93.

⁶ Marlon Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality," James Baldwin Now, Ed. Dwight McBride. (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 15; *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm. "To Our Patrons," *Freedom's Journal* 1, no. 1 (1827), 1.

⁸ Here and throughout this paper, I will bracket the term "African American community" in quotes in order to emphasize its constructedness.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006 [1983]), 36.

¹⁰ *The Black Press: Soldiers without Swords*, directed by Stanley Nelson, PBS, 1999.

¹¹ Donald A. Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington: A History of Washington Press Corp.*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 33-35.

¹² *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*.

¹³ Rev. D. Edwards Wells, "Book of the Week," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28, 1953, 8.

¹⁴ Lester Granger, "Manhattan and Beyond," *New York Amsterdam*. January 7, 1956, 12.

¹⁵ James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 44.

¹⁶ Gertrude Martin, "Book Reviews," *Chicago Defender*, January 2, 1954, 7.

¹⁷ "Author Pens For Haper's," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 10, 1953, 30.

¹⁸ Rev. Malcolm Boyd, "James Baldwin, Controversial Spokesman, Novelist of Our Time," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 5, 1963, 14; The writer of this column was a white Episcopal priest who was celebrated in the black press for his involvement in the civil rights movement. In 1977, Boyd went on to become the most prominent clergyman to come out of the closet as gay.

¹⁹ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, (New York: Dell, 2000 [1956]), 3.

²⁰ Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," 15.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Langston Hughes, "Books at Christmas and All Year Bring Knowledge and Good Cheer," *Chicago Defender*, December 10, 1955, 9.

²³ Field, "Passing as a Cold War Novel," 95.

²⁴ James W. Ivy "Faerie Queens," *The Crisis*. 64, no. 2 (1957), 123.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Thaddeus Russell, "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality," *American Quarterly*, 60, no. 1 (2008), 114.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1978]), 43.

²⁹ In its contemporary usage, "transgender" is a purposefully broad umbrella term relating to or designating a person whose perception of themselves somehow differs from their sex at birth. In my paper, the standalone prefix "trans" should also be assumed to use this definition. "Transsexual" is a much more specific term that exists (sometimes problematically) within this larger umbrella. Coined by Dr. Harry Benjamin in the *Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966), "transsexual" continues to exist in medical and psychiatric discourses as a recognized condition that is often best treated by sexual reassignment surgery. "Intersexuality," on the other hand, refers to the natural appearance of genitalia or other physical sexual characteristics that do not conform to medical definitions of either male or female. While people who are intersexual are not necessarily transgendered, in practice and on an epistemological level, intersex and transgender issues often overlap because they both challenge culturally ingrained notions of sex and gender. Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, Jay Prosser's *Second Skins*, and Anne Fausto-Sterling's "Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are Not Enough" are all excellent sources to consult for more in depth commentary.

³⁰ Jay Prosser, "Transsexuals and Transsexologists: Inversion and the Emergence of Transsexual Subjectivity," in *Sexology in Culture: Labeling*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura L. Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 117-118.

³¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (Great Britain: Flamingo, 1995), 13.

³² Field, "Passing as a Cold War Novel," 99.

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- ³³ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 13.
- ³⁴ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 140; *Ibid.*, 155.
- ³⁵ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 27.
- ³⁶ "Here's Kinsey's Report on Women: Conclusions Based on 5,490 Sex Histories," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 20, 1953, 1.
- ³⁷ J.A Rogers, "Rogers Says: A Fan of His Urges Negroes to Refrain from Helping Kinsey," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 9, 1953, 9.
- ³⁸ Alfred Duckett, "The Third Sex....The Bible and Homosexuality," *The Chicago Defender*, February 9, 1957, 1.
- ³⁹ Kelly Brown Douglas, "Black Church Homophobia: What to do about it?" *Reflections*, 2006, 12.
- ⁴⁰ Duckett, "The Third Sex", 1; *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Alfred Duckett, "The Third Sex: Analysts Rap Kinsey Report," *The Chicago Defender*, March 9, 1957, 11.
- ⁴² "ARE HOMOSEXUALS BECOMING RESPECTABLE?????" *Jet Magazine*, April 1954, 27-28, emphasis mine.
- ⁴³ Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 175.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ "Esquire Calls Riverton Houses 'A Slum,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, June 18, 1960, 1; "Plain Libel," *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 18, 1960, 10.
- ⁴⁶ Michele Wallace, "Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist Search for Sisterhood," in *Words of Fire an Anthology of African-American feminist thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 224.
- ⁴⁷ Marlon Riggs, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen," in *Brother to Brother: Collected Writings By Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill. (DC: Redbone Press, 2007 [1991]), 325
- ⁴⁸ *Chicago Defender*, March 16, 1964, A5.
- ⁴⁹ Ann Oldenburg, "Tina Fey: Tracy Morgan is not a Hateful Man," *USA Today*, June 11, 2011. Accessed via www.content.usatoday.com.

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