Pulpitic Publicity: James Baldwin and the Queer Uses of Religious Words

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“Light and life to all He brings, / Risen with healing in His Wings!”

Unexpectedly, in the work of James Baldwin, religious language is the rhetoric through which queer characters create what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner would call “counterintimacies.”¹ In their suggestive essay, “Sex in Public,” Berlant and Warner locate queer counterintimacies and queer “counterpublics” in unofficial and slightly romanticized locations, the worlds of “entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (558). Yet queer counterpublics are found not only in the “dirty-talk” (558) of the world-making and hazy spaces that Berlant and Warner pose against an official heterosexual normal. Perhaps queerness might also be found in the “sanitized” public discourses to which all of us are subject: in the excessive morality and normative words of a religious lexicon, for example, that by many definitions quickly offers the possibility of a life that cannot be explicitly articulated at the present tense of its experience. Sometimes, that is, the form of the “normal” and the assumption of identities that are quickly recognizable and socially understood, that seem normal, express a desire not merely for heterosexual enfranchisement but for legibility, community, and another route into social resistance that need not be so “counter” public in order to be innovative and queer.² Indeed Berlant elsewhere acknowledges that “the wish for normalcy everywhere heard these days, voiced by minoritized subjects, often expresses a wish not to have to push so hard in order to have a ‘life.’”³ Certainly the decision to pursue routes through rather than against more socially recognizable structures and institutions of intimacy does not always imply that one has uncritically submitted to, or is even protected by, the state or even the church.⁴

The example of Baldwin is instructive because his iconic legacy confounds the ways both queer theory and critical race theory have articulated what counts
as politically useful expression. In recent critical and political modes dedicated to
the investigation of cultural difference and identity politics, religion is not sup-
pposed to say much about queer sexuality,5 and queer sexuality is not supposed to
say much about blackness.6 Although black studies and politics do not often
accommodate queer sexuality,7 and although queer studies and politics do not
often accommodate religious studies, what we have in Baldwin is a writer who
relies on the complicated intersections of queerness, blackness, and religious
rhetoric to animate his political and aesthetic writings.8 This intersection, more-
over, tells us a different story from the dominant critical explanation about African
American responses to a racist American culture—responses that employ a “con-
juring” or “signifying” use of religious rhetoric.9 That is, Baldwin’s own use of
religious language does not fall exclusively within the black church tradition
Theophus Smith describes as “conjuralational performances at the level of social
history [that] employ biblical figures with a curative intention . . . and for the pur-
poses of reenvisioning and transforming lived experience and social reality
through mimetic or imitative operations.”10 Excellent studies like Smith’s often
make hermeneutic plays with religious rhetoric serve what might be thought of as
a therapeutic role, enabling black culture to produce a thriving community in an
otherwise hostile and racist world. What these studies de-emphasize, however, are
the ways in which even the most excellent examples of black conjuring can also
hurt and do violence to their own constituents, and how this hurt can sometimes
turn out to be helpful.11

Baldwin, on the other hand, understood the violence that often subtends the
religious expression of the black church that dominated his earliest childhood
experiences. Indeed, for Baldwin the religious was often a figure of violence. For
instance, in the mid-1980s Baldwin wrote, “To destroy a nigger, a kike, a dyke, or
a faggot, by one’s own act alone is to have committed a communion and, above all,
to have made a public confession more personal, more total, and more devastating
than any act of love: whereas the orgasm of the mob is drenched in the blood of the
lamb.”12 Here the imagery of Christian conversion, race, sexuality, and sacrifice
converge in the cultural expression of national group hatred based along lines of
identity difference. Baldwin often used similar images of the violence of a quasi-
religious communion to serve as shorthand for the violence of the American public.

Consequently, given such a dangerous characterization of religious com-
munions, it is difficult to understand what Baldwin meant when, in The Fire Next
Time, he wrote, “The word ‘safety’ brings us to the real meaning of the word ‘religi-
ous’ as we use it.”13 Indeed, his writings on religion do not immediately exem-
plify such safety. For example, the queer protagonist John Grimes, in Go Tell It on
the Mountain, converts to Christianity through a psychologically and physically violent process. The narration describes his conversion as a “power that had struck John, in the head or in the heart; and in a moment, wholly filling him with the anguish that he could never have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe.”

What is literally striking about the acceptance of John’s religious conversion and evocation (“everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” [11]) is that something so normal for this novel’s religious community is so painful for John, who had wanted “another life” (19), one that is not religious, one that does not tell him that his queer desires are sinful and damned.

It is important that John does convert and he does imagine the violence and anguish of religion, and through such imaginings he finds safety in a use of religious rhetoric that is not so much therapeutic as it is strategic. Characters like John learn how to inflect, queerly, the normal, religious rhetoric of Baldwin’s world. They showcase the particular ways religious words can equip queers with a language that possesses enough “normal” authority to provide the kinds of safety Baldwin attributed to religious words. The queer’s use of the heterosexually dominant language, however, is not a gesture of accepting the tenets of the resisting black church or even an appropriation of a white religious language for black use but, rather, an oblique deployment of the closest language of authority at hand. Baldwin’s peculiar exploitation of religious rhetoric helps describe the contours of a more unexpected institutional resistance that uses the normalizing authority of religion to make vibrant what is not supposed to be part of such normalcy: the queer. Thus I suggest in the following pages that through Baldwin’s queer evocation of religion a different picture of the dominant public sphere—the normal—comes into sharper focus. I argue that the queer exploits the pain and injury of normative narratives of belonging through a religious vernacular in order to have the privileges of publicity without having to reveal anything specific or “really” painful about minority sexuality.

“And they cried with a loud voice, saying, / How long, O Lord, holy and true, / dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell the earth?”

As Baldwin’s description of the American nation-state suggests, the contemporary public sphere loves to see violence, especially when that violence happens to minorities’ bodies. It has become now quite common to focus on the figuration of the body to narrate a history of injustice, abuse, and amnesia. Wendy Brown helps
us understand that minority resistance is often articulated through injury that gives the minority a strong voice and claim through that violence.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, words about hurt bodies have saturated much critical work that is influenced by theorists such as Michel Foucault, who incites this interest when he writes, “The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of the dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.”\textsuperscript{18} Certainly contemporary criticism has taken this cue, corporealizing history that Foucault, conveniently enough, describes as the manifestation of “the stigmata of past experience.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, John Grimes conceptualizes the past in terms of the injured bodies of his ancestors: “They were despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon, the earth’s offscouring; and he was in their company, and they would swallow up his soul. The stripes they had endured would scar his back, their punishment would be his.”\textsuperscript{20} Such impulses to render historical events through metaphors about the body, preferably a body that is wounded, correspond with what counts as public expression, according to Mark Seltzer’s revision of public sphere theory. Seltzer argues that the contemporary public is a “sociality that gathers, and public that meets, in the spectacle of the untoward accident and in an identification with the world insofar as it is a hostile place—the pathological public sphere.”\textsuperscript{21} This publicity, which is situated around the torn open body of the minority—the pathological public—becomes increasingly needy of injury, pain, and corporeal markings that make its figuration of history coherent. Baldwin understood this kind of dominant and “normal” figuration of minority history and complicated it through his critique of the way religion most often serves to render the specificity of African American historical experience. Let me explain.

Baldwin indeed appeared to follow a typical pattern of African American letters that, as Eric Sundquist argues, relies on the way “black” religion operates as the “core expression of African American culture,” serving as “a foundation for modern African American culture as an extension of slave culture.”\textsuperscript{22} Even when critics usefully foreground the linguistic dimensions of the rhetoric of the black church, they do so to elaborate an abstract, historical foundation and origin that explain religious language’s relevance for a contemporary moment that might otherwise be considered secular.\textsuperscript{23} Undeniably, John’s religiously marked flesh leads him back to where “history” often, however effectively or ineffectively, seems to lead us: to an image of an “origin,” the image of John’s ripped open and scarred ancestors, that lends shape, if not causal coherence, to what happens in the present.\textsuperscript{24} As Sundquist helpfully indi-
cates, so much African American criticism, in an attempt to “right” the historical amnesia of official, national culture, elaborates “histories,” often shaping them through imaginative reconstructions of the African American past.25 One result of such historical recovery, however, is the conflabulation of religion with African American history, leading, I feel, to a persistent reduction of the more flexible figuration of a religious blackness Baldwin created through his writings.

Reams have been written on the mutual inflection of African American and religious experience.26 Religion is often one of the most notable and dominant themes of African American poetry, and vice versa: religion has been a “primary occupation of the black American for the first century and a half of composition.”27 Trudier Harris, in an introduction to a collection of new essays on Go Tell It on the Mountain, describes the novel’s “thematic tradition” as the “influence of black fundamentalist religious traditions on African-American literature,” the literary representation of the historical and sociological phenomenon of the importance of the black church for African Americans. Harris’s claims about the religious dimension of African American experience are echoed in the links between the church and the race that are often quickly made by historians and literary critics who infuse ultimate value in the church’s organizing sociohistorical importance for black life. Carter G. Woodson, for instance, in 1939 called the black church “an All-Comprehending Institution” that left “practically no phase of the history of the Negro in America untouched.”28 “The Negro church of today,” as W. E. B. Du Bois asserted in 1903, “is the social center of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.”29 Mel Watkins portrays Baldwin’s novel as a “complex, deeply textured tale of a black youth’s salvation and religious conversion” that “captures the frenzy and almost orgiastic passion of the black Baptist church.”30 In accounts such as these the black church often becomes the capacious figure for and fast representation of the communal recognition for the African American life world that, until recently, did not have such obvious and valuable formal coherence. As C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya asserted in 1990, “It has been only in the past twenty years that scholars of African American history, culture, and religion have begun to recognize that black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldviews as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests.”31 Following a Durkheimian model that contends that religion is a “social phenomenon,” Lincoln and Mamiya offer the black sacred cosmos as the exemplar, the always “central” institution of African American history and culture in which “a shared group experience that . . . shaped and influenced the cultural screens of human communication and interpretation” (2) was made possible.
In a late essay Baldwin, however, articulated his persistent reliance on a religious idiom that puts into tension, without abandoning, the sociological centrality of the black church. Through an innovative deployment of decontextualized religious expression about the impossibility of a linear historical progression, Baldwin shifted the focus away from a typical conception of African American history when he spoke religiously: “Every good-bye ain’t gone: Human history reverberates with violent upheaval, uprooting, arrival and departure, hello and goodbye. Yet, I am not certain that anyone ever leaves home.” Baldwin recognized that a debt must be paid to the past, but instead of lauding or even elaborating such a past through the simplified figure of the black church, he chose to describe the most characteristic expression of black culture as precisely an expression, as a phrase, that is severed from the church’s past and applied to his own present context—a context outside the historical events of his participation in a religious faith community. Baldwin’s reliance on religion was entirely lexical, and the force he attributed to the specific properties of religious rhetoric has very little to do with African American history as it is conventionally conceived. Throughout his entire career Baldwin isolated the rhetorical strength of religious words; figures of speech such as keep the faith and revelation have little to do with conveying coherent religious doctrine or encouraging a strict religious belief system that only references a historical phenomenon. Significantly, he let religious rhetoric model more than a history of African American belonging.

Thus in order to stray from the familiar narratives about what makes blackness blackness, and in order for Baldwin to move beyond historical fact and a mimetic representation of the African American life world, he frustrated the connection to a past through religious words that do not so cleanly draw rhetorical figures of speech into relation with racially distinct and injured bodies. He troubled history through religious rhetoric. Indeed, as Baldwin well knew, religion does not uncomplicatedly belong to African Americans, especially to African Americans who, like John, do not necessarily want the history provided by the black church. In his famous attack on the protest fiction that dominated the African American literary scene of his early career, Baldwin critiqued Harriet Beecher Stowe’s portrayal of black characters through the way she “would cover their intimidating nakedness, robe them in white, the garments of salvation; only thus could she be delivered from ever-present sin, only thus could she bury, as St. Paul demanded, ‘the carnal man, the man of the flesh.’” As a consequence, according to Baldwin, Stowe solidified the link he then proceeded to trouble in Go Tell It on the Mountain: “Black equates with evil and white with grace” (30). By dramatizing this connection in the struggles of John, Baldwin highlighted the neg-
ative qualities of religion’s relationship with the representation of black characters that a strictly historical reading misses. Baldwin did not want to articulate uncritically the relation that makes black evil, without investigating other possible meanings that blackness would have, even within such a pernicious religious vernacular. So as Baldwin fixated on the sinful qualities of blackness, he questioned the more ambivalent relationship that African American characters have with the religious descriptors that too conveniently become the signs of a coherent African American history with a coherent community—the primary obsession of African American literary and cultural work.37 As he moved away from the then dominant protest tradition of African American literature, part of his written labor and innovation was the creation of a piece of writing that does not “bury” the “carnal man, the man of the flesh,” with a white, religious-historical garment that confirms the flesh’s negative (and black) qualities. Baldwin’s version of flesh reasserted some version of historical and literary captivity, the extension to slave culture that continues to hurt, imaginatively, the ancestors’ descendants.

Within this critique of African American historical obsession, Baldwin assigned to the queer a very critical role. The carnal man of the flesh has, in Baldwin’s imaginary, queer flesh, and this flesh is deemed through religious belief to be quintessentially sinful and historical. Queerness immediately signals such sin because Baldwin understands just how toxic Western, religious rhetoric, even in its black church form, is for the queer body. Its condemnations produce disastrous results, including successful political campaigns resulting in the loss of antidiscrimination legislation as well as recent queer funeral protests.38 The relationship between queerness and the Western, evangelical Christian tradition, indeed, is not easy. Yet this uneasiness enabled Baldwin to draw attention to the pathological qualities of the religious public sphere through religion’s explicit attack on the queer body. For instance, Baldwin’s most sustained and obliquely black novel, Giovanni’s Room, pushes the private love plot out of a small room into the open but devastating public sphere that makes the protagonist’s “love” deadly.39 David’s spurned lover, Giovanni, whom the antagonist David could not let himself love and support, is executed. David imagines Giovanni’s final moments:

Mary blessed mother of God
He [Giovanni] kisses the cross and clings to it. The priest gently lifts the cross away. Then they lift Giovanni. The journey begins. They move off, toward another door. He moans. He wants to spit, but his mouth is dry. He cannot ask that they let him pause for a moment to urinate—all that, in a moment, will take care of itself. He knows that beyond the door which
comes so deliberately closer, the knife is waiting. The door is the gateway he has sought so long of this dirty world, this dirty body.40

The religious words echoing throughout the passage frame the inevitable and sought-after death of the queer outlaw. Here the movement toward a violent death is figured as inevitable, a necessary next step, now that the queer affect has been made public through a series of unfortunate events in the novel. David’s interior monologue (the primary mode of the novel’s narration) responds to his imaginings of Giovanni’s final moments: “And I look at my body, which is under sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of a mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in time and it hurries toward revelation” (247). The contemplation of Giovanni’s body loops back into the contemplation of his own. David is confused by his desires, and the narration of David’s mediated voice ranges from oblique Christian reference (“the incarnation of a mystery”) to quite explicit allusion (“hurries toward revelation”). The severity of the situation, as well as the severity of David’s first real moments of open regret, is punctuated and punctured by the religious rhetoric in David’s thoughts. He concludes:

I long to crack that mirror and be free. I look at my sex, my troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how I can save it from the knife. The journey to corruption is, always, already, half over. Yet the key to my salvation, which cannot save my body, is hidden in my flesh. . . . I move at last from the mirror and begin to cover that nakedness which I must hold sacred, though it be never so vile, must be scoured perpetually with the salt of my life. I must believe, I must believe that the heavy grace of God, which has brought me to this place, is all that can carry me out of it. (247–48)

Until this point, religious language has been conspicuously absent from much of the text, and both characters can hardly be described as devoted to any religion. Also, there is no explicit mention of David’s desire for Giovanni. Instead the appearance of religious words helps render not religion but queer desire. The “key” to “salvation” is “hidden” in David’s flesh—it is a nakedness that David must hold sacred. Moreover, this religious body is not cracked open by this key. Instead of revealing explicitly this nakedness, religious language helps articulate, while still concealing, the “hidden” qualities lurking within queer flesh.

Religious language thus functions to represent, however negatively and
obliquely, the socially painful minority qualities of same-sex sexuality. Before
 dismissing this less direct form of representation, however, let us explore just how
 useful this kind of negative articulation of queerness might be. Nancy Armstrong,
in a discussion of Beloved, succinctly puts it, “What matters is one's ability to con- 
stitute a self within the material givens of the moment, no matter how hostile are
 those givens to the very existence of such a self.”41 People crave representation,
 regardless of how lethal such representations, at the level of representation, may
 seem to the imagined integrity of a private body.42 Indeed, sometimes there is no
 such thing as bad publicity. Or, more accurately, sometimes bad publicity can
 serve other kinds of positive, descriptive functions that are harder to detect and
 thus harder to condemn. I am not arguing that religious words are the only avail- 
able “material givens” but, rather, that religious discourse responds well to the
 abusive calls of a wounded and wounding publicity. This is not because it offers a
 spiritual therapy for the black queer but because it offers a powerful and strong
 voice that does not adequately describe the more personal, sexual affect occurring
 within the queer’s body.

These religious representations, moreover, are not representations that
directly refer to the history of the body; the queer political subjectivity created
through the religious representation does not luridly describe the corporeal, as
Foucault argues disciplinary regimes do. Through religious language, the Bald- 
winian queer figuratively responds to the pathological public sphere's demand for
a history of injury that makes the minority voice strong and possible, without
injuring the body that makes such a toxic representation. The religiously repre- 
sented queer assumes the persona of injury in order to have publicity in a patholog- 
ical sphere, to have the representations and uses of public representation—uses
that are not the same as the heterosexual statutory and narrative enfranchisements
Berlant and Warner assign to official public culture.43 That is, religious language
becomes a strong language that simultaneously hides and expresses the queer
within the more “normal” narratives of violence, pleasure, and survival people
understand as constituting the public, however intimate or pathological that public
might be.44

“Let the church cry Amen to this! And they cried: ‘Amen! Amen!’”

Despite the pain of being normal or going public, membership in a normative
story does have its privileges. Near the end of Go Tell It on the Mountain, John
Grimes comes through his conversion experience with the desire to “struggle to
speak the authoritative word” of his father’s religion.45 As this quotation suggests,
religious words indeed have a unique and strong position in John’s community as well as in the history of critical discourse. As Jonathan Culler correctly suggests, “Although in many respects we may have a ‘godless,’ secular culture, as proponents of religion endlessly tell us, religious discourse and religious belief seem to occupy a special privileged place; as though it went without saying that any sort of challenge or critique were improper, in bad taste.” This resistance to critical engagement with religious rhetoric has much to do with a huge volume of religious studies scholarship constantly elaborating the dichotomized relationship between “the sacred and the profane,” scholarship that has an interest in maintaining a privileged category of the “sacred.” For example, in a paper titled “Why Is God’s Name a Pun?” Michael Holquist characterizes the sacred as a place beyond language, beyond signification. He represents the religious as the “experience” that cannot be proven or articulated through positivist means. The sacredness of the religious rhetoric is coded as both a limit of language, the expression of what cannot be expressed, as well as the literal indication that something exists outside language and, by extension, human culture.

Baldwin’s own critics rely on a similar separation between religious and critical discourses. David Leeming, Baldwin’s biographer and former secretary, comments that the reception of Go Tell It on the Mountain indicated a fundamental misunderstanding of Baldwin’s work: “Some reviewers saw it as a work that was concerned primarily with ethics and religion.” People refused (and still refuse) to engage his religious discourse critically and thus read the religious as a belief system that Baldwin must eventually abandon in favor of his more secular writing concerns (such as race relations, homosexuality, nation formation, and literary invention). For example, Sondra A. O’Neale concludes her essay on the force of religion in Baldwin’s work by explaining a quote he once gave to Nikki Giovanni: “‘Well, it depends on what you mean by God. . . . I’ve claimed Him as my father and I’ll give Him a great time until it’s over because God is our responsibility.’ Although that is not belief, his religious rhetoric at least indicates that his search for God, his primal father, is not abandoned.” Here O’Neale struggles to situate Baldwin’s arguments in relation to an underarticulated belief context. Again the sacred/profane discussion dictates how and if a critical engagement can happen. Because Baldwin is not appealing to “belief,” or to a discussion of how religious belief works, O’Neale dismisses the religious in his work. For O’Neale, Baldwin must then be talking about the importance of fathers. It becomes apparent that critics who want to use Baldwin to understand religious belief, ritual, and doctrine wrestle with the manner in which he evacuated religious language from its historical specificity. Moreover, Baldwin, although called a preacher by critics such as
Hortense Spillers was certainly not a theologian; one learns very little about the religious traditions and “belief” Baldwin referenced throughout his work. But this peculiar employment of religious rhetoric does not devalue its place or importance in his work.

Indeed, religious rhetoric, despite its sacred aspirations, still appears in quite worldly cultural artifacts—words. Moreover this language, as I have been suggesting, mediates quite “profane” problems. Fortunately there are other theorists striving to scrutinize the way a religious idiom operates as a specifically coded language, and I agree with Kenneth Burke when he argues, “In general, there was a tendency to assume a simple historical development from the ‘sacred’ to the ‘profane,’ from the ‘spiritual’ to the ‘secular.’ But logology systematically admonishes us against so simple a dialectic.” By the term logology Burke means an in-depth study not about theology per se but about peoples’ relationships to words that indicate religious experience. He asserts that in his study of religious rhetoric, “we are to be concerned not directly with religion, but rather with the terminology of religion; not directly to man’s relationship to God, but rather with his relationship to the word God. Thus the book is about something so essentially rhetorical as religious nomenclature” (vi). Through his approach to religious rhetoric, Burke redirects critical attention away from the sacred/profane dialectic and into a more demanding taxonomy of how religious words work.

Burke’s critical assertions do not neglect the hierarchicizing power of religious words in history that Culler obliquely references. Instead Burke seriously exploits the hierarchy, the strength, of a religious vernacular. Through a series of analytic analogies Burke addresses the privileged rhetorical force and power that religious words are thought to have in time. Confronting the sacred not as a category beyond experience but as a category that asserts that it is beyond experience, he explores the way sacred rhetoric achieves the sensations of its “superior” position in discourse. He argues that the feelings of sacredness in religious rhetoric come from their linguistic characterization as the supreme title of experience. Burke explains his “fourth analogy”:

Imagine the ideal title of a book. An ideal title would “sum up” all the particulars of the book. It would in a way “imply” these particulars. Yet the particulars would have all the materiality. Similarly, with a movement towards a title of titles (the unifying principle that is to be found in a sentence, considered as a “title” for the situation it refers to): such a movement is towards a kind of emptying, it is a via negativa. . . . The stress in the fourth analogy is not upon this negative element, but upon a search for
the title of titles, an over-all term (which turns out to have this negative principle as an essential part of its character). . . the fourth [analogy] concerns the nature of language as a process of entitlement. Such a secular summarizing term would be technically a “god-term,” in the sense that its role was analogous to the over-all entitling role played by the theologian’s word for the godhead. (25–26)

There is something semantically thrilling about using words that refer to the “sacred,” or the “god-term.” Of course Continental formations of logocentric philosophy enter this description, and one can hardly read the paragraph without recalling Jacques Derrida.54 I specifically cite Burke because he dubs religious rhetoric as a search for the “title of titles,” the ultimate entitlement. Whether or not religious words can actually guarantee such authority is not as important as recognizing the desire that some words have for such ultimate authorizations. Religious language that seeks this kind of entitlement, that wants to be authoritative while still claiming to reference some kind of experience, is a language that craves and is thought to provide definitive speech. In other words, according to Burke, religious language (among other things) attempts to be a language of powerful, unquestionable speech. Religious language is a form of speech that thinks it can order other kinds of speech, and it therefore parades as the most public and authoritative (read normal) mode of talking.

But more than describing religion as a language of rhetorical entitlement, Burke delineates the way the anxieties of language and historical transformation also inform what might be thought of as a concealing function within religious rhetoric. In his fifth analogy the anxiety of a religious sentence’s “history” in discourse is most directly addressed. Burke writes,

Here [in an Augustine quotation] the succession of words in a sentence would be analogous to the “temporal.” But the meaning of the sentence is an essence, a kind of fixed significance or definition that is not confined to any of the sentence’s parts, but rather pervades or animates the sentence as a whole. Such meaning, I would say, is analogous to “eternity.” In contrast with the flux of the sentence, where each syllable arises, exists for a moment, and then “dies” to make room for the next stage of the continuing process, the meaning is “non-temporal,” though embodied (made incarnate) in a temporal series. The meaning in its unity of simplicity “just is.”
The flux of a religious sentence, the movement in time of particular words, is not unsettling when the “essence” of an “eternal” sentiment inspiriting the sentence is thought to be freed from the possible historical derivations that the temporal words might produce. This is not to assert that there really is an essence lurking within religious words, that there is something radically ahistorical and essential in a religious sentence. Burke is much more critical when he explores the connotations of a language that wants to be sacred, that functions as if it were sacred and essential. The words, certainly, are important because they manifest the hope for sustained intention and meaning within the fleeting existence of a sentence in time, a sentence at the mercy of a language that exists within a disintegrating history. But the sentence as a whole retains its importance because the words are thought to matter less than its fixed significance, or essence. Religious words thus create an aura of underspecified wholeness that somehow points to a significant essence. As the earlier analogy helps suggest, the authorizing words of religious rhetoric make its words seem entitled to this aura, despite the potentially negative movement into words that might contradict the essence, or intention, of the sentence. The religious sentence, then, will always mean an enduring something, but a something not necessarily specified in and stringently bound to its language. This “essential” sensation, combined with Burke’s earlier analogy of entitlement, helps us understand that the religious sentence will thus mean a something that cannot be characterized but that can be guaranteed in its validity and ability to have meaning ultimately without a reliance on specificity. For instance, it does not matter specifically what the word *Amen* describes; instead it is a strong word enabling the religious thought, experience, or emotion to have a definitive weight.

Certainly there are similarities between Burke and Baldwin. In “Every Good-bye Ain’t Gone,” Baldwin repeated the story of Ezekiel’s wheel, a theophany that represents that which cannot be visibly rendered by virtue of religious doctrine: the image of God. Baldwin wrote,

*Circumstances*: a rather heavy word, when you consider it, connecting for me, by means of Ezekiel’s *wheel in the middle of a wheel*, with the iron, inescapable truth of revolutions—we black folk say what goes around, comes around. Circumstances, furthermore, are complicated, simplified, and, ultimately, defined by the person’s reaction to these circumstances—for no one, no matter how it may seem, simply *endures* his circumstances. If we are what our circumstances make us, we are, also, what we make of our circumstances. This is, perhaps, the key to history, since *we* are history, and since the tension of which I am speaking is so silent and so private, with effects so unforeseeable, and so public. (644)
All people are circulating, circularly, in public, and this publicity forces everyone to take on the burdens and pleasures of representation. It is important that these publicized histories are also “heavy words,” words made understandably heavy with the religious allusion and word Ezekiel. These histories cannot escape the “truth of revolutions”; they cannot escape the manner in which the repetition of historical circumstance suggests the “truth” of God, of Ezekiel’s wheel, that goes around regardless of what happens in the human’s circumstantial world. The significance of history, of people, then, accrues value not because it is history but because the unspecified history reflects a religious meaning that will mean something ultimately.

For Baldwin religious language, then, lent definitive and strong characterizations to people circulating within circumstantial history—“heavy,” definitive codings that characterize rather than describe historical circumstances. In other words, the religious idiom provides a mode of talking that seems powerful and valuable without needing to communicate anything specific. Religious words thus parade as meaningful expression that is not contained by its historical, lexical transformations, or even its specific referents. There is another story lurking behind the abusive words: an undescribed “essence” in whose existence we have faith. Religious words then do not describe historical situations and people directly. Instead the religious vernacular suggests something powerful that need not specify whence that power comes. As a consequence, in Baldwin’s writings, religious words work as an excellent register that gives voice to the queers who might not be able to specify exactly what they are trying to say. Queers make heavy and meaningful their queer desires, but the words acquire that meaning not from a specific narration of actual, historical sex acts. Instead authoritative meaning is created by the mean-“spirited” religious vernacular of the Baldwinian queer’s public.

“In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. / He began to shout”

In her influential essay “Wounded Attachments” Brown asks, “What are the logics of pain in the subject formation processes of late modern politics?” Although Brown rightly notes the ways modern, painful identities often “redraw the very configurations and effects of power they seek to vanquish” (ix), this effect cannot be only due to one’s nominal investment in an identity in pain. Although there are indeed very real and very pressing painful concerns that must be addressed in oppositional politics, something more emancipatory might be possible as one
takes on the quick and strong publicity offered by a martyred condition that acts as if it is something painful. One’s injured claim might not be as comprehensive, or perhaps as truthful, as one might represent. When Baldwin’s John, for instance, falls to the floor to convert, the descriptions conspicuously are not realistic but fantastical. The descriptions of the pain of religious conversion are imagined; they are in John’s head, but despite the numerous images of physically injured bodies brought on by religious conversions, these violent images do no “real” harm to his body. As I have been suggesting, in Baldwin’s work the logics of pain in political subject formation are also the logics of normal publicity—being public is described as an experience of injury. The images of corporeal harm brought on by religious words, however, do not describe John’s hurt shape as much as they point to what does not have an adequate language, a reference that defies conventional narratives of belonging. Specifically, the queerness of Baldwin’s characters is oblique and underdescribed through the wounds of religious conversion. Queerness, I argue, marks the hidden story that is not being directly told in the language of the church, but a story that is told subtextually through the strong representations of bodies in pain. Hence queerness becomes the ambiguous “It” of religion, of Go Tell “It” on the Mountain, the It that must be told, however indirectly and violently. That is, “our queer love is God.”

When John, for example, experiences the power and force of conversion, he lies on the ground feeling the “agony” of religious conversion, and he questions, “Is this It?” (193–94). John’s body is splayed out in the normal, pathological public of the floor of his church, where he is the center of everything, and he cannot find the adequate voice to describe the transformations that are painfully occurring within “his soul” (194). “Soul,” however, is not accurate. The It, the queerness of John’s experience, more specifically dwells inside his body. It is important to note that Baldwin was obsessed with what for him became a queer biblical passage: the narrative of Noah and his son Ham. Even though the tale has a specific exegetical history of interpretation, Baldwin used this story as a pathological shorthand that marks the body black with queerness. In Go Tell It on the Mountain the protagonist John twists on the “threshing floor”:

Yes, he had sinned: one morning, alone, in the dirty bathroom, in the square, dirt-gray cupboard room that was filled with the stink of his [step]father. Sometimes, leaning over the cracked, “tattle-gray” bathtub, he scrubbed his father’s back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his [step]father’s hideous nakedness. It was a secret, like sin, and slimy, like the serpent, and heavy, like the rod. . . . Then the ironic
voice, terrified, it seemed of no depth, no darkness, demanded of John, scornfully, if he believed that he was cursed. All niggers had been cursed, the ironic voice reminded him, all niggers had come from this most undutiful of Noah’s sons. (197)

The scriptural narrative of Ham, who “saw” a naked and drunk Noah, is, for John, the folklore interpretation of how the mark and curse of Canaan (Ham’s son) is originated.58 This passage, which famously has given racist ideologies a powerful scriptural sanction, becomes a narrative explanation for why the sin of seeing, and desiring to see, the “nakedness,” the “troubling sex,” of John’s stepfather is a reenactment of a same-sex sexual action that resulted in “all niggers [being] cursed”: this is the inaugural queer sex act of Genesis that marks Ham’s children as an inferior race. Lee Edelman makes explicit the connections between homophobia and white racism that echo in this biblical verse. He argues, “Made to articulate the ‘racial’ dynamic of a masculinist culture, homophobia allows a certain figural logic to the pseudo-algebraic ‘proof’ that asserts: where it is a ‘given’ that white racism equals castration and ‘given’ that homosexuality equals castration, then it is proper to conclude that white racism equals (or expresses through displacement) homosexuality and, by the same token, in a reversal of devastating import for lesbians and gay men of color, homosexuality equals white racism.”59 Edelman’s assertion that racism and homophobia are intimately linked is exemplified by the manner in which John interprets the Ham and Noah story: those who are not cursed by racism are those who did not see Noah’s nakedness. White people are not descendants of Ham, so they never had a family member “look” at Noah’s naked body; they never had a queer relative, and so they are not subject to the mark of Canaan (blackness). But the queer Ham did “look” at Noah, he did engage in a queer sex act, and he bequeathed the mark and curse of “blackness” to his ancestors. So, for John, not only do “homosexual acts” equal justified white racism, they actually create the “punishment” of blackness itself. Queerness and blackness are closely aligned in Baldwin’s eyes—and with that connection he upset traditional, religious history about blackness by founding the race through queer sexuality. He turns the history of the black race into a perplexing, religious, and queer It.

John is therefore encouraged to avoid the darkness of Ham’s act and sons and achieve a “better” state of existence through the adoption of a religious morality that nonetheless overtly denigrates and orders the “nakedness” of his desires and his body; the double bind of being black and queer pushes John further from a sinless, uncursed white Israel. To return to the promised land, if one who is
bound by black queerness actually can, is to strive for a heterosexual “whiteness,” a toxic history of African American belonging that makes the black body religiously sinful in its queerness. In this frame John, through the narrative voice, ponders what God has to offer:

“Salvation is real,” a voice said to him, “God is real. Death may come soon or late, why do you hesitate? Now is the time to seek and serve the Lord.” Salvation was real for all these others, and it might be real for him. He had only to reach out and God would touch him; he had only to cry and God would hear. All these others, now, who cried so far beyond him with such joy, had once been in their sins, as he was now—and they had cried and God had heard them, and delivered them out of all their troubles. And what God had done for others, He could also do for him. (144)

Reality and community are thus normative narratives of painful pasts that can be made better through the optimistic and strong religious belief. There are grave difficulties resulting from “once be[ing] in [one’s] sins,” but the image of God offers a way out. If only John were to “reach out,” to let “God touch him,” God would deliver him like all of the others—“Salvation was real for all the others.” Canaan’s curse, John’s reenactment of the origin of that curse, and the isolation that both the sin and the curse require would all be eradicated if John were to cry out to God. This is the promise that “only the hand of God could deliver” (144), a promise that suggests that Ham’s queer sin could be overcome (that John’s black body could be overcome), and that a better, more equal existence eventually would be achieved if only John were to become a Christian. Conversion is the way in which John could strive for the publicity of white straightness that is also the African American historical story. According to this logic, this conversion, however, must kill the queer affect, the generating qualities of blackness and injury in a public sphere.

Significantly, in John’s conversion experience the intention to replace queer affect with a new, more socially and spiritually acceptable heterosexuality is not fulfilled. The promise of conversion fails, and not only does John remain queer, but his queerness is given a voice. He mines the rhetoric of the church to articulate the troubling affect of his “sex.” Baldwin later described the conversion experience with a humming:

[It] was a sound of rage and weeping which filled the grave, rage and weeping from time set free, but bound now in eternity; rage that had no language, weeping with no voice—which spoke now, to John’s startled soul, of
boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience, and the longest night; of the deepest water, the strongest chains, the most cruel lash; of humility most wretched, the dungeon absolute, of love’s bed defiled, and birth dishonored, and most bloody, unspeakable, sudden death. Yes, the darkness hummed with murder: the body in the water, the body in the fire, the body on the tree. (200–201)

Instead of conversion implying a turn to a rebirth, conversion aurally turns toward a death that scatters the dead body all over the landscape: the water, the fire, and the tree. Eventually the humming, the inarticulate sound, does stop, and John learns to speak his father’s authoritative text; but he is still full of inarticulate queer feelings that can only be forcefully voiced through his newly acquired rhetorical position: “He wanted to stop and turn to Elisha, and tell him . . . something for which he found no words. ‘Elisha—’ he began, and looked into Elisha’s face. Then: ‘You pray for me? Please pray for me?’” (219).

What this story provides is the characterization of the “religious” as a helpful publicity that can only be effective if it characterizes itself (not its queer bodies) as a potent and toxic publicity. Queer bodies are given a public voice in pathological representation without having to have that voice lead back, in the form of actual physical violence, to the physical body. Queers are given a larger, abstract name, “saved,” that does not accurately represent the queer and, instead, splits up the minority body and gives it a new body that is unfamiliar but functional within a larger community: “He moved among the saints, he . . . was one of their company now. . . . he scarcely knew how he moved, for his hands were new, and his feet were new, and he moved in a new and Heaven-bright air” (207). When queers assume the safety of religious expression, although at the level of representation it might seem like a violence, religious words actually endorse the queers’ ability to be public. In other words, religious rhetoric is not the queer’s own specific voice. The rhetoric offered by Jesus, the renaming, not the historically ravaged body, gets to do the talking, thereby enabling intimate forms of communication. As a consequence, suddenly John is able to assert, “‘I’m going to pray God,’ . . . and his voice shook, whether with joy or grief he could not say—‘to keep me, and make me strong . . . to stand . . . to stand against the enemy . . . and against everything and everybody . . . that wants to cut down my soul’” (207). John, despite the way his body shakes his authoritative voice, has the ability now to stand up against the world, to address the world, and to remind people that he was “saved” and that he can now move with the aid of a prosthetic voice the violent conversion into religious words has offered.
Indeed, John has found a new name that does not banish him into the difficult whiteness that is supposed to be offered by the conversion; his religious language does not negate the fact that he is, indeed, still queer and thus black. He now has the language that hides and speaks his own difficult circumstances:

And the Holy Ghost was speaking—seeming to say, as John spelled out the so abruptly present and gigantic legend adorning the cross: *Jesus Saves*. He stared at this, an awful bitterness in his heart, wanting to curse—and the Spirit spoke, and spoke in him. Yes: there was Elisha, speaking from the floor, and his father, silent, at his back. In his heart there was a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and with that authority, to confound his father. (194–95)

John, through religion, finds a speaking authority, a holy tongue of Elisha, as he is wrenched out of his cursed heart; this authority provides a crucial distance from and perspective on the conditions of his life that offer only damnation—the life world of his father and the saints. As I have suggested throughout this essay, such a figural distance, reinforcing the distinctions between the figurative and the literal, fortunately reminds us that there can be fields of resistance even within the most normative and violent of words—that there can be another “essence” indirectly referred to through a “normal” expression. Such queer inflections remind us that although public rhetorical expressions might viciously excite and express injury, there might be another, more literal and private story of one’s self, one’s skin, hidden from a hateful and pathological congregation by something like a pulpit.

Notes

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2. See Biddy Martin, “Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary,” *dif-


4. An interesting side note: in Louis Althusser’s often quoted “Ideological State Apparatuses,” he functions as the supreme exemplar of an ideological apparatus, even after Althusser has claimed that the church has been replaced by the school as the most current and effective example of ideological interpellation. Althusser, “Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971).

5. See Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). For instance, in her description of the Reaganite Right’s deployment of normative, intimate, and generic modes of citizenship in order to influence how people get to feel their selves as public, Berlant does not address the role of the Religious Right or how religion has functioned for queer representability. At the 1999 MLA Annual Convention in Chicago, a panel sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Caucus, “Why Religion? Why Now?” emphasized the urgent need to make queer theory speak to how religion intersects with queer life worlds, legislation, historiography, and literature in complicated ways. And at the 1998 MLA Annual Convention in San Francisco, I presented part of this essay in a special session on this very problematic.

7. The recent special issue of Callaloo 23 (2000) attempts to correct, substantially, this analytical problem.
15. I will discuss John’s queerness below.
16. Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), is extraordinarily useful in outlining the historical lineage of the powerful pleasures involved in observing the slave body in spectacular and often oblique scenes of subjection. This section’s heading is from Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, 63.
20. Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, 201.
21. Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” October 80 (1997): 24. When I mention the pathological public throughout this article, I am referring to the theories and readings Seltzer produces in his article; in his seminar “The
Pathological Public Sphere,” at the Society for the Humanities, Cornell University, fall 1997; and in his most recent book, Serial Killers: Life and Death in America’s Wound Culture (New York: Routledge, 1998).

22. Eric J. Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 458. Sundquist’s impressive work, especially on W. E. B. Du Bois, charts the way one part of religious experience, Spirituals, informs an intellectual and cultural lineage that gives coherence to the kinds of double vision Du Bois famously articulates in The Souls of Black Folk (1903; rpt., New York: Fawcett, 1961). Although he sidesteps the specific histories of African American religious experience, Sundquist explains the way Du Bois transforms religious experience into a figuration of black/slave history that provides him and others a formal structure for identifying the general themes of salvation, mourning, work, and endurance that the spirituals announce. My argument about religious language’s formal capabilities, however, differs from Sundquist’s. I argue that religion helps evacuate the official and traumatic version of historical significance from the blackness of bodies in order to keep race an open abstraction that can only raise questions and suspend any final reading of the racialized body.

23. In a recent article by Michael Eric Dyson, “What’s Derrida Got to Do with Jesus? Rhetoric, Black Religion, and Theory,” in One Nation under God? Religion and American Culture, ed. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1999), 76–97, there is an initial attempt—theoretically informed and influenced by “cultural studies”—to focus on religious rhetoric. His focus on how “speaking and writing can be viewed as a dominant shape of black intelligence; speaking and writing can be viewed as the crucial rhetorical surfaces on which black identity is inscribed,” often leads us, however, to an overly quick understanding of black identity and the surfaces that contain “speaking and writing” (76). Moreover, much like others before him, his focus on religious rhetoric yields more discussion about the historical significance of the black “oral” tradition, the political efficacy of black religious speaking as an effective form of speaking in the public sphere, and how African American experience can gain a logic and coherence through religious expression: “Words can lend ontological credence to racial identity, and . . . religious language can house an existential weight, a self-regenerating energy, that can be levied against the denials of black being expressed in racist sentiment and practice” (84). At the heart of this analysis the strictly literary qualities of religious language are often neglected in favor of a social and historical explanation that can help articulate a program of resistance. Although I appreciate and often agree with this gesture, this brand of analysis tends not to explore adequately the ways in which the racial codes are often created by religious rhetoric, thereby complicating the project of understanding the aesthetic relevance of religious rhetoric, especially if a literary project is not only directed toward giving “ontological credence” to an articulate shape of a “black being” that may or
may not benefit from the aestheticization of blackness. My article, however, seeks to
explore the connections between religious rhetoric and the literary world where bodies
are racialized through deliberate, formal techniques of language. A literary under-
standing of literature, moreover, need not imply a political evacuation. The concern
with the language of any set of representations that appear in a literary text need not
only be focused on a primarily mimetic idea of what literature is supposed to reflect,
and the need not to be “real,” “natural,” or “historical” seems important if race is to
be named as the complicated abstraction it actually tends to be.

24. This statement refers to a now typical description about what history seems to mean
for literary critics. See, for a prime example, Cary Nelson, Repression and Recovery:
Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945 (Madison:
University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), esp. 1–19; see also Fredric Jameson, The Polit-
“Only a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and rad-
ical difference of the social and political past while disclosing the solidarity of its
polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences and struggles, with those of
the present day” (18).

25. Baldwin himself was quite invested in assuring the primary importance of African
American history. He lent his celebrity to a 1968 hearing on the establishment of a
committee on “Negro history and culture,” where he asserted that “my history is also
yours” and that the integration of the African American historical record in national
curricula was a key to the security of civil rights and successful integration. See
Howard N. Meyer, ed., Integrating America’s Heritage: A Congressional Hearing to
Establish a National Commission on Negro History and Culture (College Park, Md.:
McGrath, 1970), 42. In this instance Baldwin followed a typical pattern of African
American social reform that invested much in historical corrections. For instance, a
pamphlet published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peo-
ples, Anti-Negro Propaganda in School Textbooks (New York: NAACP, 1939), describes
why African American history is so desperately needed: “They [the parents of African
American children] are beginning to see, as never before, that these false theories [of a
primarily white America and the inferiority of African Americans] that we hear so
much about today, have been so deftly placed in our textbooks, that their subtle infil-
tration, not only in the minds of growing white youngsters but in the minds of Negroes
themselves, has been an almost unconscious development” (5–7). The correction of
such omissions and stereotypes is often conceived of as a revised historical knowledge
that should become official curriculum, especially in public schools. Hence, Baldwin
appeared before the special hearing to argue for the establishment of a national com-
mittee on African American history and culture.

26. Much of the analysis I cite in the next paragraphs relies on the seminal work on the
specificity of the black experience of Baptist-based faiths, Mechel Sobel, Trabelin’ On:
The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). This historical work, although I find some of its large claims about West Africa upsetting, is valuable as a study that inspired subsequent historiographical work that took seriously the idea of a “black sacred cosmos” articulated through a dominantly white Christian religion that could easily acculturate and oppress minority populations such as African Americans. According to Sobel, “The black Baptist faith gave coherence to prewar slave society. It provided the possibility for meaningful lives with meaningful goals. It was a black creation, made in contact with the white Baptist faith and affecting that faith, but it remained the very special Sacred Cosmos of blacks, filled with spirit and joy and mourning and time past, all used to understand the present. Seeing themselves as the New Israel, waiting for God's redemption, black Baptists knew they would ‘emerge the conquerer’” (xxiv). Although this is an extremely useful and helpful intervention into understanding that religion is not always bad and oppressive, and although this understanding is most certainly true in some instances, this kind of specific lauding of the syncretic nature of the black Baptist faith and its influence on the historical importance of the black church for African American cultural projects sidesteps what hurts and hinders the articulation of African Americanness that is a primary occupation of Baldwin's own writing. Hence I am less willing only to celebrate the importance of the hybrid religious experience of African Americans when reading Baldwin, who was very critical of the way religion negatively codes the flesh of African Americans.


33. The influential Robert A. Bone, writing in 1956, offered an early critical reading that continues to hold most critics of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. It forces us to find exemplary African American historical tricks in the text. For example, Bone writes, “*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is thus a novel of the Great Migration. It traces the process of secularization that occurred when the Negro left the land for the Northern ghettos. The theme, to be sure, is handled ironically. Baldwin's protagonist ‘gets religion,’ but he is too young, and too innocent to grasp the implications of his choice” (“James Baldwin,” in *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon [Englewood
Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974], 33). For other versions of this argument see Harris’s introduction to New Essays on “Go Tell It on the Mountain.” The most glaring omission in Bone’s argument is the fact that all the characters, who all migrate north, do not also migrate into secularization, but secularization’s opposite; they all devote themselves to the hardness of the religious Word. Ironic or not, Baldwin perpetually led his black characters back to church, back to the threshing floor where conversions occur, not merely to honor and repeat and reproduce a religious history but also to give shape, to give words, to what it means to be black in the United States. The bulk of Go Tell It on the Mountain tracks the sheer arduousness of what it takes to come to church, what it takes to belong to a place that would “swell with the Power” that the church “held”; “like a planet rocking in space, the temple [John’s church] rocked with the power of God” (15). Gabriel’s, Elizabeth’s, and Florence’s stories of eventual evangelical acceptance, called “Prayers,” are the interior sections of the text that are punctuated with severe injustices that cannot be avoided. All characters, moreover, have “sinned.” And all of his characters really have no choice but to capitulate to the demands of the religious community.

34. Henry Louis Gates Jr. makes his point about the mimetic compulsion in African American letters quite clear when he describes the way the history of slavery and uplift collapsed form and content in African American letters, a history that is characterized as propelling African American artists inevitably into an unavoidable tradition of social reform: “By the apex of the Harlem Renaissance, then, certain latent assumptions about the relationships between art and life had become prescriptive canon. In 1925, Du Bois outlined what he called ‘the social compulsion’ of black literature, built as it was, he contended, on ‘the sorrow and strain inherent in American slavery, on the difficulties that sprang from emancipation, on the feelings of revenge, despair, aspiration, and hatred which arose as the Negro struggled and fought his way upward.’ . . . The confusion of realms [life and art] was complete: the critic became social reformer, and literature became an instrument for the social and ethical betterment of the black person” (Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987], 30).

Gates continues and eventually claims, “Black literature and its criticism, then, have been put to uses that were not primarily aesthetic; rather, they have formed part of a larger discourse on the nature of the black and his or her role in the order of things” (42).


36. Baldwin’s frustration with the then dominant literary models of representing race, as the attack on Stowe and Wright suggests, was with a sense that the “realness” of African American characters had heretofore been achieved through an appeal to typicality, to an obvious articulation of recognition that cannot handle the otherwise messy qualities of “the human being.” This forceful restriction of what blackness indicates
resonates in John’s own crisis. As a result John’s body, as he sees it, must come into
critical view that can help move beyond black typicality. For the most useful account of
the way statistics and typicality have long informed the creation of American realist
and naturalist modes (well before Wright’s own racialized version of naturalist fiction),
see Mark Seltzer, Bodies and Machines (New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. chap. 3,
“Statistical Persons,” 91–118.

37. Hortense Spillers makes a more elaborate and sophisticated version of this point in her

38. I am referencing events occurring well after Baldwin: for instance, the State of Col-
orado’s Amendment 2, November 1992, which was eventually reversed by the U.S.
Supreme Court in May 1996, as well as the Matthew Shepard incident in October
1998.

39. Although neither of the queers in this novel is explicitly African American, the final
section of this essay will demonstrate the ways queerness and blackness are intimately
tied to each other in Baldwin’s imaginary.

Club, 1993), 246–47.


42. It sounds as if I am edging toward a discussion of negativity, but I do not believe that I
am. As in Freud’s very brief and suggestive 1925 essay, “Negation,” negative speech in
the analysis makes possible the representation of that which is repressed. I do not
think the assumption of a toxic, self-negating expression of self in my religious dis-
course archive has elements of repression. I would, however, want to investigate these
connections in a more lengthy fashion later.

43. Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.” They argue that the desire for social membership
is often a frustrated practice that comes up with the “couple form” and “heterosexual
marriage,” an encounter that often produces disastrous results: “People feel the price
they must pay for social membership and a relation to the future is identification with
the heterosexual life narrative; that they are individually responsible for the rages,
instabilities, ambivalences, and failures they experience in their intimate lives, while
the fractures of the contemporary United States shame and sabotage them everywhere.
Heterosexuality involves so many practices that are not sex that a world in which the
hegemonic cluster would not be dominant is, at this point, unimaginable. We are try-
ing to bring that world into being” (557). See also Berlant’s “Live Sex Acts” chapter in
Queen of America and Michael Warner’s recent offering, “Normal and Normaller:

44. I am referring to two compelling accounts of the public sphere, Berlant’s Queen of
America and Seltzer’s Serial Killers.

45. Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, 207. This section’s heading is from p. 17.


56. Perhaps this is why so few people comment on the queer subplot of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

57. In this sense Baldwin corroborates a religious theory of the body found in Elaine Scarry's inquiry into Western religious texts. Scarry writes, “The graphic image of the human body substitutes for the object of belief that cannot be represented.” The hurt image of the human form, which unlike “God” can be represented, is necessary because it assures the faithful of the belief's existence, the “realness” of God (and the religion's belief system organized under the image of God). In the Judaeo-Christian texts, as Scarry points out, God’s “realness” is both absent and present and thus needs some kind of formal structure where the religious and the secular worlds can be made, destroyed, and remade. See *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 198. That is, when the realness of God and faith in God are in doubt, the corporeal human form will be narrated as a kind of suffering that serves as “evidence” of God's otherwise abstract but still palpable ubiquitous power—a power that is everywhere and nowhere on every page of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, a power that is made manifest in words and bodies that believe in such words.

58. The biblical phrase *seeing one's nakedness* may be a euphemism for having sex with someone. There is debate as to whether this passage refers to Noah's nakedness or to that of Noah's absent wife. Nevertheless, the way it is transmitted to Baldwin, and then
to Baldwin’s characters, indicates that the act of seeing the nakedness is a homosexual action and sin. In his biography of James Baldwin, David Leeming writes, “Obsessed by guilt Jimmy [Baldwin] and John were fascinated by the story of Noah’s son’s sinful viewing of his father’s genitals, and were turned to the rumors of sexuality in the church and the clear signs of it on the streets outside. . . . Both were saved by the direct help of young male ‘saints’ with whom they had fallen in love” (Baldwin, 85). In the specific scriptural reference in Genesis (9.20–26) Ham incestuously takes advantage of his father’s drunken stupor, brags to his brothers about it, and thus receives the curse for his son. The annotation of the New Revised Standard Version argues that “the curse implies that Canaan’s subjugation to Israel was the result of Canaanite sexual practices” (Lev. 18.24–30). The Leviticus reference is the passage after the infamous “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev. 18.22), which makes such sexual transgressions enough of a crime to justify cultural alienation and forced exile. Whether the exile is a result of ritual impurity or homosexual offense is much debated. Nevertheless, John reads himself into the offense and links it to his own “sinful” practices.


60. This move to denigrate all things queer in a range of African American scholarship has also been noted in some influential essays. See Clarke, “Failure to Transform,” and Hill, “Who Are We for Each Other?” For a particularly lucid account of this persistent opposition see McBride, “Can the Queen Speak?”

61. Despite the representation in the text of much of John’s conversion as individualized, interior struggles, the “threshing floor” event is in a public space replete with family, fellow saints, and a very publicly known Bible story detailing how queerness has inspired unequal race relations.