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Queer Identity and Racial Alienation: The Politics of Race and Sexuality in James Baldwin and in the "New" South Africa

William J. Spurlin

Summary

This essay (re-)examines the critical reception of African-American writer James Baldwin in the early 1960s, a reception that is itself marked as an interpretive act. The rhetorical and cultural tropes used to read and interpret queer identity and the relation of these tropes to early-1960s cultural conversations and institutional discourses on pre-Stonewall queer culture and pre-*DSM-III* medical and psychoanalytic discourses on homosexuality operative at the time in the United States are analyzed, as are the tropes used to read African-American identity as they informed American civil rights discourses and the concomitant discourses of black struggle and resistance. While references are made to such texts by Baldwin as *Another Country* (1962), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), the primary focus is not on Baldwin's homosexuality per se, or on gay or racial themes in his texts. Rather, the emphasis is on reading the *cultural lenses* and *rhetorical practices* that informed interpretations of African-American and queer identity in Baldwin and in his work in the early 1960s, and the ways in which a variety of oppressions, while not reducible to one another, may intertwine.

The essay also examines Baldwin's reception among African-American critics and intellectuals in the United States Black Power movement in the 1960s, particularly Eldridge Cleaver, who made rhetorical use of the same cultural tropes of pathology and abject gender in reading homosexuality, arguing that homosexuality alienated Baldwin from his African heritage. Through comparative analysis and through examining race through nationalist constructions of sexuality and gender, the essay analyzes how similar cultural tropes used to read homosexuality operate in homophobic discourses in southern Africa, which are more readily mobilized with reference to emerging lesbian and gay movements among Africans, and ignore the politics of sexuality as a site of decolonization.

Opsomming

Hierdie essay (her)-ondersoek die kritiese ontvangs in die vroeë sestigs, van die Afro-Amerikaanse skrywer, James Baldwin; 'n ontvangs wat op sigself as 'n beduidende vertolkende handeling beskou kan word. Die retoriese en kulturele trope wat ingespan is om die homoseksuele identiteit te lees en te interpreteer, die relasie van hierdie

trope tot kulturele gesprekke en institusionele diskoerse in die vroeë sestigs, die pre-Stonewallse homoseksuele kultuur en pre-*DSM-III* mediese en psigoanalitiese diskoerse oor homoseksualiteit op daardie tydstip in die VSA, word geanaliseer. Die beeldspraak wat gebruik is om Afro-Amerikaanse identiteit te lees, word ontleed, aangesien dit die Amerikaanse burgerregte diskoerse geïnformeer het, asook soortgelyke diskoerse tydens die swart struggle en die gepaardgaande verset. Alhoewel Baldwin na sodanige tekste verwys soos *Another Country, Giovanni's Room* en *The Fire Next Time,* is die primêre fokus nie op Baldwin se homoseksualiteit per se nie, of op die gay of rassistiese temas in sy tekste nie. Wanneer die kulturele lewe en retoriese praktyke egter gelas word, kan dit gebeur dat die geïnformeerde vertolkings van Afro-Amerikaanse en queer identiteit in Baldwin en in sy werk gedurende die vroeë sestigs, asook die verskeie vorme van onderdrukking wat weliswaar nie van die een na die ander herleibaar is nie, tog met mekaar verweef raak. Die essay ondersoek ook Baldwin se ontvangs in die geledere van die Afro-Amerikaanse kritici en die Black Power-beweging in die VSA gedurende die sestigs. Die klem val veral op Eldridge Cleaver, wat retoriese gebruik maak van dieselfde kulturele trope van patologie en verworpe geslag in die lees van homoseksualiteit en aanvoer dat laasgenoemde Baldwin van sy Afrika-erfenis vervreem het. Met behulp van vergelykende analise en deur ras te beskou vanuit 'n perspektief van rasionalistiese konstruksies van seksualiteit en geslag, ontleed die essay hoe soortgelyke kulturele trope wat aangewend word om homoseksualiteit te lees in homofobiese diskoerse in Suidelike Afrika wat geredeliker gemobiliseer word met verwysing na ontluikende homoseksuele bewegings onder Afrikane, en ignoreer die politiek van seksualiteit as 'n terrein van dekolonisasie.

The ascendancy of lesbian and gay studies and the arrival of the "queer moment" in the humanities have not only enabled new analyses of cultural works, but have simultaneously called further attention to the ways in which literature, culture, subjectivity, difference, gender, and race are constituted and understood so that new narratives of culture may emerge and more traditional ones may be reread and reformulated in politically different terms. In other contexts, queer studies, as a discipline, has insisted on the historical and material specificity of queer identity. But while often central to liberationist politics, this insistence may potentially lead to essentialist impulses that leave the hetero/homo opposition in place, and echo, as Lee Edelman reminds us, the homophobic insistence upon codifying and making legible sexual identities (Edelman 1994: 4). Even though queer theorists, such as Diana Fuss, Eve Sedgwick, and others influenced by Foucault, have helped us to understand sexual identities not as fixed or as stable, but as socially situated and eliciting otherness, which has helped to rupture the hetero/homo split through which we have traditionally categorized sexual identity, this does not seem to go far enough, and queers of color have argued for more complex theorizations of "queer". Queer studies has yet to more seriously analyze the political implications of the problem that Eve Sedgwick has identified in *Epistemology of the*

Closet as to "how a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systemically with each other; and especially how the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others" (1990: 32).[1] By failing to interrogate how notions of queer identity and community may be limiting and may therefore set up new sites of oppression (by race, gender, and social class, for instance), we ignore how standard accounts of the social world are left intact, or more specifically, we fail to analyze the relation between the forms of queer experience we theorize and the specific institutions of contemporary patriarchal societies. Speaking of queer-inflected uses of public spaces in queer activism and critical practice in the United States today, and what Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman have referred to as "the relative weakness with which economic, racial, ethnic, and non-American cultures have been enfolded into queer counterpublicity" (1993: 215), Philip Brian Harper argues that "such work is "queer" only to the extent that it takes into account this whole constellation of factors [as mentioned by Berlant and Freeman] - in addition to and in their imbrication with sexual object-choice - as it interrogates the function of subjective identification in the socially constitutive activity of public exchange" (Harper 1997: 25).

Operating on the premises, then, that sexual identity is never experienced in isolation, but is always already mediated by other axes of social positioning (including race, gender, class, and geopolitical spatialization), that power is interarticulated through more than one specific vector of domination (racism, sexism, homophobia), and that readings of queer identity, like other narratives of reading, are rhetorical practices that "extend and manipulate the social practices, political structures, and material circumstances in which they are embedded at particular historical moments" (Mailloux 1996: 5), this essay (re)examines the critical reception of African-American writer James Baldwin in the early 1960s in the United States, a reception which I mark as itself an interpretive act. I am interested in analyzing the rhetorical and cultural tropes and signifying practices used to read and interpret gay (male) identity in the context of a historically specific interpretation of Baldwin and the relation of these tropes to early-1960s cultural conversations on civil rights, pre-Stonewall queer culture, and pre-*DSM-III* medical and psychoanalytic discourses on homosexuality in the United States.[2] In an effort to resist impulses still operative in queer studies that reread canonical authors queerly or attempt to stabilize the queer referent in works by contemporary queer authors, I am only secondarily interested in Baldwin's homosexuality or in exposing gay themes in his texts; my primary interest is in reading the cultural lenses that interpreted queer identity in Baldwin's work and in American culture in the 1960s. Though I will allude to Baldwin's texts, particularly *Another Country* (1962) and *Giovanni's Room*

(1956), I am more interested in interpreting the cultural lenses and tropes used to read queer identity and desire in Baldwin's work, setting these in broader social discourses on homosexuality and race, and exploring, through comparative analysis, their possible social and political intersections with queer identity politics and cultural practices in southern Africa. Despite juridical changes in the "New" South Africa, the status of homosexuality remains a highly contested and contradictory question, and heteronormativity and homophobia continue to function as significant vectors of domination as I shall discuss later.

I also write this essay to underscore that while queer cultural and political struggles are *not* reducible to contemporary strategies and understandings of queer resistance, those that occur at specific historical moments may have importance for thinking about queer struggles in the present and in other locations. Since homosexuality is a socially and historically produced category rather than one that is fixed or transcends history and the specificity of social context, it is useful to look at the historicity of queer identity through specific attention to the pre-Stonewall period, particularly when we consider that an entire generation of queer scholars, activists, and cultural workers have come of age after this historical turning point.[3] As gay historian, Jonathan Ned Katz argues that the study and knowledge of queer history raises the important question as to whether a society can accommodate the demands of the dispossessed "for power and control over the machinery by which they make their lives" (Katz 1992: 8), to which I would add "by which their lives are made, or by which their lives, our lives as lesbians and gay men, are socially and culturally constructed". But in any inquiry into queer history, it must be similarly acknowledged that as we try to understand the past, historical events cannot be judged from disinterested positions but are influenced by the stances and positions we occupy in the present. With this in mind, while I am trying to understand a particular historical reception of Baldwin and find, through comparative analysis, connections to queer movements in southern Africa, particularly South Africa, I must acknowledge that contemporary work in American queer studies, academic queer theory, and, to some extent, postcolonial studies have enabled a space for me to (re)read the cultural lenses that helped interpret Baldwin and his work and constitute his reception in the early 1960s, and that my readings and critique of the claims made about homosexuality in the period under discussion and in nationalist discourses in southern Africa make rhetorical use of queercentric interpretations of queer identity by these disciplines and by queer political practices in the present.

The specific interpretive act to which I am referring occurred on 17 May 1963, when *Time* magazine did a cover story on Baldwin as part of an article "Races: Freedom - Now" which reported on the violence taken by the police and

the Public Safety Commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama, to uphold racial segregation and squelch black resistance. Even though Baldwin's picture appears on the front cover with the caption "Author James Baldwin" next to it, the magazine devotes only two pages specifically to Baldwin after first describing black struggles in Birmingham led by Dr Martin Luther King. The pages given to Baldwin at first appear to address his views on racial relations, following the publication of *The Fire Next Time* as a book earlier that year and *Time's* attempt to pay serious attention to the political achievements of African-Americans against the backdrop of the movement toward civil rights. While Baldwin's most recent biography remarks how this same *Time* article casts him as spokesman and prophet (Leeming 1994: 22), it fails to mention the rhetoric of homophobia with which *Time* represents him, which certainly should have been obvious by the 1990s when the biography was published. In less than subtle contrast to Martin Luther King, whom the article masculinizes as a black leader, *Time* immediately proceeds to claim that Baldwin "is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Negro leader. He tries no civil rights cases in the courts, preaches from no pulpit, devises no stratagems for sit-ins, Freedom Riders or street marchers" (*Time* 1963: 26) . The story goes on to speculate on Baldwin's sexuality, so as to mark his homosexuality as if it threatens to "pass" un(re)marked, not only through its comparison of Baldwin to King, but through its obviously coded description of Baldwin as "a nervous, slight, almost fragile figure, filled with frets and fears. He is effeminate in manner, drinks considerably, smokes cigarettes in chains, and he often loses his audience with overblown arguments" (p. 26). It is important to bear in mind that this article was written a year after the publication of Baldwin's novel *Another Country* (1962), which frankly depicts queer desire, particularly the relation between Eric and Yves in Paris, and candidly calls into question the social conflation of gender and sexuality (as if these were continuous and collapsible categories). *Giovanni's Room* (1956) would have also been part of Baldwin's critical reception in the early 1960s; but while several early reviews of *Giovanni's Room* often glossed over its homosexual content, by the time *Another Country* appeared in 1962, it had become increasingly difficult not to read either of these novels queerly or from a gay perspective. The important issue at stake here, I must reiterate, is not so much Baldwin's own (homo)sexuality per se, but that he was read and interpreted as queer by critics and by the media, and how readings of queer desire and queer identity in his work and in him made use of and extended dominant social practices, cultural conversations, and institutional discourses on homosexuality at a particular historical moment, in this case the early 1960s.[4]

This was all that was said, or more accurately, implied, about Baldwin's

homosexuality in the article; but in order to broaden the scope of the cultural conversations and institutionalized discourses on homosexuality at the time that were put to use in interpretive arguments about Baldwin and his work in particular and about queer identity in general, I would like to turn to an important issue of *Life* magazine, that other mass-circulated periodical that entered middle-class American homes in the 1960s, which did a double-feature exposé entitled "Homosexuality in America" a year later on 26 June 1964. Unlike the *Time* article of 1963, which reads queer identity in the context of a prominent cultural figure, the *Life* articles are an early attempt to read queer identity as a public position and in the context of a queer community. Once again, as was the case with Baldwin, gay men are stereotypically represented as effeminate; one reason they are attracted to large urban areas, writes Paul Welch in the first article, "The 'Gay' World Takes to the City Streets", is because the professions most favored by homosexuals are interior decorating, hairstyling, and fashion design which provide the best job opportunities in the cities. The article also contends that most gay men are easily identified (in 1964) by their "fluffy" sweaters [!!], tight khaki pants, and tennis shoes (Welch 1964: 68). Though the article acknowledges that not all gay men are effeminate, it still maintains the discourse of deviance in its descriptions of the leather bars in San Francisco, commenting on the "obsessive" effort of gay leathermen to appear masculine and tough "in the rakish angle of the caps, in the thumbs *boldly* hooked in belts" (Welch 1964: 70; my italics). But again acknowledging that effeminate gay men and gay leathermen are not representative of the majority of gay men, and that eighty-five per cent of gay men look and act like other men and can not be spotted for certain even by "experts", Ernest Havemann, author of the second article in *Life* on etiology, still makes use of the rhetoric of deviance (and thereby (ef)feminization) in telling readers that "[o]ften the only signs are a very subtle tendency to over-meticulous grooming, plus the failure to cast the *ordinary man's* customary admiring glance at *every* pretty *girl* who walks by" (Havemann 1964: 77; my italics). The juxtaposition of "man" and "girl", as well as the agency of the male gaze, not only attempts to produce a marker/sign with which to identify gay men and make them culturally legible, but simultaneously points to gender politics in that "man" and "girl", used to simultaneously describe and condone heterosexuality, are not invested with equal power.

Largely influenced by dominant social and cultural assumptions of gender and sexuality in its representations of homosexuality as pathological, psychoanalysis, perhaps the most rigorous and elaborate institutionalized discourse on sexuality in the West, also played an influential role in the cultural management of queer identity. This took an even more decisive turn in 1962, a year before

the *Time* article on Baldwin appeared, when Dr Irving Bieber and his colleagues published a monograph based on a ten-year investigation of the etiology of male homosexuality. The study contested Kinsey's 1948 findings on the scope of homosexual experiences among American males and also became the leading authority and standard pronouncement on male homosexuality, until, after widespread criticism from within and outside of the psychiatric, psychoanalytic, and medical professions against heterosexual intercourse as the standard for sexual health, the APA decided in 1973 to delete homosexuality as a category of psychopathology from the *DSM*. Bieber and his colleagues studied the family constellations of one hundred and six gay male patients as reported in therapy in an effort to shift psychoanalytic attention to early childhood experiences, particularly the relationship between the growing child and his parents, rather than studying the role of constitutional factors in the development of homosexuality which Freud clearly indicated was also important to consider (Freud 1962: 6-7, 12n). It was Bieber's study that promulgated the view that a high proportion of gay men had "close-binding mothers" who demasculinized their sons and thwarted the development of their heterosexual drives, had detached, hostile fathers, and fit the cultural stereotype of the sissy during latency and adolescence (Bieber 1988: 79-80, 310).[5] Bieber is cited as an "expert" in the *Life* feature, saying that the use of the word "gay" by homosexuals "is only a flippant and rather pathetic attempt to cover up deep and chronic feelings of pathological depression" (Havemann 1964: 78). Though later serious objections would be raised for the study's predisposition toward a psychopathological view of homosexuality, and for using a sample of gay male patients with other psychological disturbances and then generalizing the findings to the general population of gay men not in treatment, one can nonetheless see how Bieber's clinical and analytic arguments centered on gay men as effeminate and as pathological figure rhetorically in the media's representation of Baldwin in particular, and gay men in general in 1963 and in 1964 respectively. One must also speculate if the *Time* article implies a direct correlation between its description of Baldwin's smoking and drinking and its description of his "nervous, slight, almost fragile figure" and "effeminate" manner. Psychoanalysis, especially in the context of the Bieber study, becomes more than just a clinical practice as its discourse on homosexuality is tied to political and social practices and beliefs. The homophobic manner in which Baldwin and his work were read and received in the early sixties is not simply a pure reflection of psychoanalytic thinking on homosexuality; at the same time, psychoanalytic thinking on homosexuality was largely influenced by and reflected American homophobia. It seems as if such institutional interpretations of homosexuality, as well as the tropes used to interpret it socially and culturally, served each

other; as Ronald Bayer points out, American society is dependent on "health" as a moral category for the ideological justification of many of its discriminatory practices (Bayer 1987: 13), and this, I think, is reflected in both the *Time* and *Life* articles. At the same time, the anxiety over the uncertainty in identifying gay people and the discursive strategies this, in turn, incited to expose them, are closely related to the American postwar political imaginary. Robert J. Corber, in his book *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, has pointed out that because gay men could escape detection by "passing", whether consciously or not, as straight, they were linked to subversive groups who were allegedly conspiring to infiltrate and then subvert the nation's cultural and political institutions and were therefore security risks (Corber 1997: 11), largely because they looked like "everyone else" and easily evaded social apparatuses of surveillance.

The more or less exclusion of lesbians in *Life's* exposé on homosexuality (and the relative lack of attention paid to them in the clinical literature) enables further readings of social practices and assumptions about gender that helped constitute readings of queer identity in the early 1960s. Lesbians are mentioned only tangentially in the *Life* feature; once in the Welch piece as being part of the "outcasts" and "misfits" in San Francisco's Tenderloin district along with gay prostitutes, drunks, and "cheap con men" (Welch 1964: 68), and again in the Havemann article, where it is argued that clinical studies of homosexuality have ignored lesbians because it is easier for a woman "who is afraid of men to perform adequately in marriage than it is for a man who is afraid of women" and because lesbians are not as numerous, promiscuous, or conspicuous as their male counterparts (Havemann 1964: 79). As in the earlier example of gender bias where gay men are marked by a failure to cast an admiring glance at women ("pretty girls"), the reasoning employed in this line of argument is an extension of social practices prominent in the early 1960s prior to the sexual revolution and the oppositional impact of second-wave feminism later in the decade, and is buttressed by psychoanalytic theory that explained homosexuality as a phobic response to people of the opposite sex. In a patriarchal regime of male dominance and misogyny, the power relations between the sexes nearly ensure the wife to be in the more subordinate position in the marriage whatever her sexual preferences. Whether it was out of fear (made possible by unequal power relations between the partners in the marriage, perhaps more the case in the early 1960s than in the present), or just a matter of simply not being sexually attracted to men, the reason it was "easier" for women to perform well in marriage was because that kind of conformity and deference to men was, especially at the time, so much a part of the socialization of women. Given the state of sexual politics and the supposedly smaller number and lower social and sexual profiles of lesbians in the early 1960s, lesbianism was not seen as a

threat to the status quo and did not figure prominently in cultural conversations and institutionalized discourses on homosexuality at the time. However, assumptions about a lower social profile of American lesbians in the 1950s and early 1960s are, in the end, misleading. Lillian Faderman's historical work *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* has shown that lesbian enclaves and subcultures proliferated through the postwar years in the United States, and that social invisibility was not the result of a small population of lesbians but the "discreet" style of many middle- and professional-class lesbians who escaped notice by the heterosexual world (Faderman 1992: 185-186).

While the *Time* feature on Baldwin occurs against the backdrop of black struggle in the spring of 1963 as he made the lecture circuit in California following the publication of his provocative essay *The Fire Next Time*, wherein he questions assimilationist models for black equality by candidly asking if white people should be taken as the model by which to live (Baldwin 1963: 94-95), exposing the myths and costs of assimilation, his reception was also marked by the anxiety over and threat of homosexuality treated frankly and unapologetically in novels such as *Another Country* and *Giovanni's Room*, as well as speculation on his own homosexuality. At the same time, unlike some strands of contemporary identity politics in the United States, Baldwin did not see race and sexuality, or other axes of social positioning, in parallel relation to one another, but questioned models of political solidarity and resistance based on one's membership in a particular community, and was interested in looking at the ways in which a variety of oppressions intersected. Robert Corber's analysis of *Another Country* shows how frequent shifts in the novel's point of view encourages identifications *across* lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class (though these identifications are seldom realized by the five principal characters in the novel). This, he argues, enabled Baldwin to stage the construction of subjectivity along several axes of difference in order to critique the patterning of identity by kinship relations along a single axis which often prevented African-Americans, women, lesbians, gay men, and other disenfranchised groups from overcoming the racist, sexist, and homophobic structures of postwar American society (Corber 1997: 178).

Baldwin's poignant treatment of homosexuality, and his construction of subjectivity and identity politics along intersecting and mutually inflecting axes of difference, led to intense criticism and censure later in the decade from the late African-American critic Eldridge Cleaver in his collection of essays *Soul on Ice*. Interestingly, Cleaver, in spite of his embrace of the politics of black struggle, makes rhetorical use of dominant cultural conversations on gender-specific behavior and its causal link to desire in describing Baldwin's critique of these in *Another Country*, which Cleaver saw as an attack on a "natural" black

masculinity, a rejection of Africa, and an *assertion* of gay superiority (Cleaver 1968: 109-110). After briefly praising Baldwin's work in the beginning of the essay, "Notes on a Native Son", Cleaver, in carefully coded terms not unlike the *Time* article, describes how he gradually begins "to feel *uncomfortable* about something in Baldwin," and how he was personally insulted by Baldwin's "*schoolmarmish* dismissal of [Norman Mailer's 1957 essay] 'The White Negro'" (p. 98; my italics). He also criticizes Baldwin for making retreats to the security and camouflage of "the *perfumed* smoke screen of his prose" (p. 100; my italics). Cleaver's feminization of Baldwin reaches its most outrageous climax when he declares that in their sickness, gay black men are in the position of "bending over and touching their toes for the white man", a sickness which he says causes them to uncontrollably "redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm" (p. 102). Not only does Cleaver blatantly ignore the wide range of possible roles gay women and men may play sexually, all of which are obviously not reducible to the "bottom" role and may vary between and within specific erotic acts, he continues to speak of Baldwin's character Rufus Scott in *Another Country* as a "pathetic wretch ... who let a white bisexual homosexual fuck him in his ass" (p. 107). Yet regardless of the race of the penetrator in gay male sexual relations (and Cleaver's ignorance of the finer points of gay male sex!), the point is that Cleaver and others in the United States Black Power movement in the 1960s saw homosexuality among blacks as a form of *ideological* penetration by whites, that is, as introduced into black culture from without and inherently foreign to it. Looked at in this light, homosexuality, a white man's decadence and disease, according to Cleaver, has "deprived [the black homosexual] of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull" (p. 103).

But in his very arguments, Cleaver makes rhetorical use of cultural conversations and institutionalized discourses, including psychoanalysis, imported from the dominant Euro-American culture to read and interpret queer identity homophobically; specifically Cleaver appeals to what Judith Butler and others have referred to as the heterosexual matrix, which legislates that a stable sex be expressed through a stable gender that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler 1990: 151n). Cleaver's feminization of Baldwin and his "attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender" (Butler 1993: 238) to gay black men raises for speculation whether it was he or Baldwin who was more eager for the "fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love [and acceptance] of the whites" (Cleaver 1968: 99). Equally important, his homophobic reading of Baldwin as emasculated because he is gay, is linked to gender oppression and misogyny insofar as it reduces black power to the phallus. Indeed, African-American feminist

thinkers, such as Deborah E. McDowell, bell hooks, and Joyce Hope Scott, have critiqued the almost exclusive focus on race in African-American literary and cultural discourses, often tantamount to a focus on maleness, and the subordination or complete erasure of black women (McDowell 1989: 59). As Mark Gevisser notes in speaking of similar readings of black identity in South Africa that reproduce the logic of phallic masculinity, one is left asking what the role of black women may be in the politics of liberationist struggle (Gevisser 1995: 70).

Baldwin dared to speak out against racism and to write poignantly of homosexuality while not conforming to black or white social expectations about masculinity himself, which, together with his homosexuality, Cleaver believed, alienated him from his African heritage and from his connections to black resistance. Speaking of the American Black Power and Black Aesthetic movements, Henry Louis Gates remarks that black national identity became sexualized in the 1960s in such a way as to engender a curious relation between homophobia and black nationalism (Gates 1993: 234), and this did have an effect, I believe, on Baldwin's literary reputation as a black writer and as a potential black leader. While Baldwin continued to speak out militantly against racism, he never achieved the stature of other black leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X because he did not fit the image of (straight) black male virility many black leaders wished to be projected publicly by their spokesmen as a way of resisting racism.[6] Baldwin's resistance to heteronormativity (and therefore site of potential power given the attention he received as a writer at the time and the rising momentum of the civil rights movement) was regarded, in the context of the early sixties and the rhetorical strategies used to represent him as homosexual, as an assault on dominant cultural practices. This aggression of "flagrancy" simultaneously incites discursive and institutional strategies to "expose" homosexuality, to mark its difference, but always through the gaze and specification of patriarchal (and therefore homophobic) appropriation. Speaking to this point, Lee Edelman notes that gay resistance through assertive and unapologetic representation of gay men or gay male sexuality in a homophobic regime signifies in the view of the dominant order "an act of aggression, an assault that sodomitically unmans the very body through which that dominant order represents itself" (Edelman 1994: 65).

The same loss of power through homosexual penetration resonates in Cleaver and in some Afrocentric/nationalistic discourses inasmuch as they embrace the idea that being queer is a way of being "un-African". Molefi Kete Asante, for instance, in his book *Afrocentricity*, writes that "homosexuality is a deviation from Afrocentric thought because it makes the person evaluate his own physical needs above the teachings of national consciousness", and argues that homosexuality cannot be condoned for the national development of a strong

people (Asante 1980: 64-65). Such a perspective, however, not only once again makes rhetorical use of outdated (though still widely used) studies of the etiology of homosexuality, in that Asante insists that raising children Afrocentrically will give them "*healthy* self concepts" and teach the *male* child "that his manhood is attached to a mind working on important questions" (Asante 1980: 65; my italics), it relegates black gay men and lesbians to the margins of black struggle, shows little concern for black *woman*hood, and unrealistically assumes that black heterosexuals engage in sexual practices for the purposes of reproduction and the perpetuation of the race at the complete expense of physical needs for pleasure (for which he criticizes queers) and psychological needs for intimacy with another person. Additionally, Asante's position on homosexuality forecloses discussion on how a variety of oppressions may productively intertwine, and is detrimental to the building of broader coalitions through which to further disrupt patriarchal power from a variety of locations.

Studying the critical reception of Baldwin in the 1960s through the rhetorical strategies and cultural tropes used to represent him as queer and as African-American, and the ways in which these related to and extended social, political, and economic practices at the time, is not only limited to the specific historical period in question, but has wider cultural and political implications for reading emerging queer identities and cultures in post-colonial contexts, outside of the Euro-American axes of contemporary queer power, where the queer subject is often constructed through similar signifying practices. Though I appreciate Corber's point that Baldwin believed African-American culture to be the product of peculiar circumstances, I cannot agree that African-American culture can be only tenuously connected to the cultures of postcolonial Africa (Corber 1997: 177) to the extent that such a claim can potentially foreclose the possibilities of comparative analysis across cultures and across national boundaries. It may be difficult to connect Baldwin and African-American culture to the cultures of Africa using only race as a point of comparison, but it may be possible to begin to think about comparative inquiry when we look at race specifically through cultural constructions of sexuality and gender and focus on specific historical events, in this case, on cultural and political issues pertaining to Baldwin's reception in the 1960s and similar issues pertaining to contemporary queer struggles in southern Africa, without reducing one context to the other and without making universalist or foundationalist claims. Concerning Cleaver's and Asante's positions on homosexuality, which have been echoed by President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and by supporters of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who at her trial carried placards declaring "Homosex is not in black culture",[7] and considering Anne McClintock's point that lesbian and gay

activists in South Africa have often been condemned as supporting lifestyles that are imports of empire (McClintock 1995: 384), one can begin to ask the extent to which nationalistic discourses make use of the same cultural tropes of pathology and abject gender that similarly characterized Baldwin's literary and cultural reception in the United States in the 1960s. Jacqui Alexander has noted that homophobia in postcolonial nation-states often makes use of classificatory systems that are reminiscent of colonial relations of rule, where strains of "evidence" are conveniently and idiosyncratically borrowed from science ("laws of nature"), medicine (outdated psychiatric discourses on perversion), and "common" sense (Alexander 1997: 84-85). Consider Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's much publicized denunciation of gay men and lesbians at the official opening of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare in August 1995, ironically themed "Human Rights and Justice", from which a small exhibit by the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) was excluded by government order at the last moment:

> I find it extremely outrageous and repugnant to my human conscience that such immoral and repulsive organisations, like those of homosexuals who offend both against the law of nature and the morals of religious beliefs espoused by *our* society, should have any advocates in our midst and even elsewhere in the world.
>
> If we accept homosexuality as a right, as is being argued by the association of sodomists and sexual perverts, what moral fibre shall *our* society ever have to deny organised drug addicts, or even those given to bestiality, the rights they might claim and allege they possess under the rubrics of individual freedom and human rights, including the freedom of the Press to write, publish and publicise their literature on them?

(*New York Times*, August 2, 1995; quoted in Dunton & Palmberg 1996: 9-10; my italics)

Indeed, nationalistic discourses, such as those articulated by Mugabe and frequently supported in Zimbabwe and other parts of the region, are particularly underscored with reference to emerging lesbian and gay movements in black communities. Two weeks after Mugabe's attack, *The Chronicle*, a Harare newspaper, played on nationalist and masculinist assumptions that the imperial imprint of homosexuality is emasculating for Africa and "feminizes" the nation-state (conceived of as masculine):

> Painful experience reminds us Zimbabweans and all other Africans on the continent of moves orchestrated by colonialists to wipe out anything that had to do with African culture as constituted mainly by our customs and traditions .... Many years after decolonisation, attempts to wipe out what is left of our cultural values are still being made - and made with a vengeance in some cases, witness

> the *shrill* outcries over the refusal by the Government to allow the Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe to *peddle* its ideas by exhibiting at the recent Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare - a refusal that all Africans who cherish their cultural identity - or what remains of it - should support unflinchingly.
>
> (The *Chronicle*, Harare, August 9, 1995; quoted in Dunton & Palmberg 1996: 12; my italics)

Ironically, such an argument, along with appeals to a natural, precolonial, heterosexual African identity, rearticulates a homophobic discursive grid and system of inscription with which to read same-sex desire not altogether different from the white colonialist legacy nationalist discourses purport to resist. The nation-state's fantasy of itself as masculine similarly points to and extends the ambivalence at the site of authority, not between colonizer and colonized as articulated by Homi Bhabha, but by the production of differentiations through which discriminatory practices of the nation-state "map out" queers as "Other". In naming queers as such, the nation-state, following Bhabha, both projects and masks difference through strategies of repetition and displacement, asserting mastery of the Other through its discourse and simultaneously finding its authority slipping away (Bhabha 1990: 81, 84). At the same time, nationalistic appeals to "authentic" African beliefs and ways of being positioned in the world, as Anthony Appiah notes, see Africa as culturally homogeneous and fail to account for the diversity of its people and its cultures (Appiah 1992: 24). Moreover, nationalist ideologies, fueled by nostalgic appeals to a pre-colonial authenticity, are not only flawed because they assume that cultural practices can return to some pure or "unsullied" condition (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 41-42), they also further normalize domination, fail to acknowledge the multiplicity and fluidity of African identities and cultures shaped by historical, economic, and political influences, and maintain a problematic self/Other split between Africa and the West, all of which, in addition to the censure of homosexuality, are highly characteristic of the imperialist gesture.

It is especially unfortunate that Baldwin did not live to see the dramatic changes that have occurred in postapartheid South Africa since his death, where, in the context of current debates on difference and democratic community and African National Congress attempts at national reconciliation, previously marginalized voices, including those of lesbians and gay men, are claiming subjectivity, cultural legitimacy, and political viability. Queer identities and cultural practices in contemporary South Africa are important in relation to the kind of identity politics Baldwin professed because they are being shaped by the resistance to fixed identities and fixed notions of culture previously imposed by the system of apartheid, and because new spaces of queer visibility and identity politics among Africans (as opposed to their confinement largely to white

middle-class urban areas) have broadened the spectrum of queer identities in the region. Yet at the same time, material conditions in South Africa still mitigate against the fullest realization of democratic community and postapartheid promise. Black lesbian and gay writers have written on the personal limitations and psychic violence inflicted upon lesbians and gay men of African descent, who, in a regime of compulsory heterosexuality, the material remnants of which still remain in South Africa despite the new Constitution and other juridical changes, often assume their only choices are to take their African heritage as primary, suppressing their queer sexuality, or to identify openly as queer while suffering a sense of wounded African identity.[8] Such wounds are not only inflicted by homophobia within particular races, but by queer whites as well who historically have refused to engage how their readings of queer identity, especially if informed by more politically conservative assimilationist beliefs and strategies, reproduce dominant social orders when it comes to issues of race. Hein Kleinbooi writes of the intense alienation he experienced as a gay black student activist at the University of Cape Town, where his gay white colleagues equated the heterosexist and homophobic oppression they experienced as homosexuals with the racism he experienced growing up on the Cape Flats, thereby trivializing the violence and poverty resulting from racial oppression, and where his black liberationist comrades told him he was "hijacking the struggle" for racial equality when he spoke to them of gay rights (Kleinbooi 1995: 264). As Baldwin and others have reminded us, one cannot define one's identity only in relation to the oppressor, and only from a single axis of difference. Bell hooks, in speaking to and for African-Americans, argues in her book, *Art on My Mind*, that this oppositional logic prevents one from moving toward the practice of freedom and the decolonization of the mind. She asserts that "we can liberate ourselves and others only by forging in resistance identities that transcend narrowly defined limits" (hooks 1995: 8).

It is, it seems, radically important, then, that lesbians and gay men in southern Africa, in order to resist new hegemonic reifications of race, nation, citizenship, and sexuality, take a visible role in helping to *rearticulate* and *redefine* African identity and subjectivity while simultaneously resisting the colonizing gestures of Western queer identity politics and academic queer theory, neither of which have addressed seriously *localized* questions of identity, experience, history, and sexuality. Difference is not simply a politics of assertion, but "must be developed within practices in which *differences* can be affirmed and transformed in their articulation with categories central to public life .... Difference must be central [and not merely peripheral] to the notion of democratic community" (Giroux 1991: 49; my italics). In South Africa, then, can democratization, national rebuilding, deracialization, and national healing and reconciliation be

fully understood and realized without an analysis of the sexual, just as any analysis of the sexual needs to be theorized within specific material conditions? As McClintock has argued, postcolonial feminist struggles have taught us that the insistence on silence about gender conflict, where it already exists, is to cover and thereby ratify women's disempowerment and maintain the nation-state as a repository of male hopes, male aspirations, and male privilege (McClintock 1995: 385). Likewise, following the implications of McClintock's argument, to posit lesbian and gay struggles as somehow less urgent than the more sobering task of national reconciliation and renewal in South Africa, and not to recognize the transformative power of the politics of sexuality as a site of decolonization, irresponsibly defers and trivializes the political demands of queers, and enables heteronormativity, as a normalizing regime, to perpetuate its own ideological longevity.

Notes

1. This is especially true when we consider that gay white men, in particular, have focused on their oppression as queer without sufficiently acknowledging their proximity and access to male privilege and the specific contexts in which their oppression may (or may not) operate. For a more thorough discussion of the more or less slippery relation between privilege and struggle among gay men, see my essay "Sissies and Sisters: Gender, Sexuality and the Possibilities of Coalition" (Spurlin 1998).

2. The *DSM* refers to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) used to diagnose psychiatric disorders. The third edition (*DSM-III*), published in 1980, removed homosexuality as a category of psychopathology as a result of the APA's historic 1973 decision. While as a gay man, I cannot accept many of the precepts of psychoanalysis concerning homosexuality prior to the 1973 decision, and I find intensely problematic discussions of the fairly new diagnostic category of "Gender Identity Disorder in Children" in more recent clinical literature, one cannot deny the powerful cultural influence of psychoanalytic and psychiatric discourses on homosexuality in the period under discussion, in the present American context, and in non-American locations in medical, clinical, social, political, and academic contexts.

3. An important question that needs to be raised concerning Stonewall is the extent to which it serves as an appropriate model for modern gay liberation. Queer struggles in the United States and in Europe have blinded us in the West to the struggles of non-Euro-American queer communities where Stonewall may or may not serve as a significant event in claiming a queer identity or in reclaiming

a queer past.

4. Even though many of Baldwin's characters are bisexual, and though Baldwin often chose to represent himself as bisexual rather than as gay, it is still my contention that interpretations of Baldwin and his work nonetheless made use of dominant cultural conversations on homosexuality which were largely homophobic.

5. Bieber's book, originally published in 1962 under the title *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Male Homosexuals*, was republished in its entirety in 1988 (with only a new Foreword added) under a revised title *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study* by the same team of co-authors who were also the original researchers in the 1962 study. All references in my text are to the 1988 edition of the 1962 study.

6. It is interesting to note that while Baldwin militantly spoke out against racism and felt that sexual matters were best kept private, a position, which, according to David Bergman, Baldwin embraced even more strongly after Cleaver's attack (Bergman 1991: 167-168); he is not very frequently taught in the United States in courses on American literature or in African-American studies. But in ironic contrast to his reception in the early 1960s, and to his own preference to take more of a public stand on racial rather than sexual issues, Baldwin's work has a strong presence in queer studies. Indeed, it is often difficult not to find a syllabus for a lesbian and gay literature course in the United States that does not contain such works as Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) or *Another Country* (1962).

7. In December 1997 Winnie Mandela appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to answer for her involvement in the kidnapping and beatings of several black youths (one of whom, Stompie Moeketsi Seipei, was later found dead) all of which she denied. At her trial in 1991, as Rachel Holmes has pointed out, Winnie Mandela's legal team adopted a homophobic defense strategy designed to justify the beatings as necessary to save the youths from the alleged homosexual advances of Reverend Paul Verryn, a Methodist minister. Through the defense's rhetorical conflation of homosexuality with child sexual abuse, and with the help of the popular media, Holmes argues that a homophobic discourse was produced that fed off social phobias about homosexuality and anxieties about "child" sexuality already in place at nearly the same moment that the African National Congress (ANC) formalized its commitment to equal rights for lesbians and gay men in the draft Bill of Rights (Holmes 1997: 168-169).

8. Addressing this point in an African-American context, Max C. Smith refers to these two positions as "Black gays" and "gay Blacks" respectively (1986: 226).

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