UNDERGROUND MEN: ALTERNATIVE MASCULINITIES AND THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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This study explores intersections between performance, race and masculinity within a variety of expressive cultural contexts during and after the African American Civil Rights Movement. I maintain that the work of James Baldwin is best situated to help us navigate this cross section, as his fiction and cultural criticism focus heavily on the stage in all its incarnations as a space for negotiating the possibilities and limits of expressive culture in combating harmful racial narratives imposed upon black men in America. My thesis begins with a close reading of the performers populating his story collection *Going to Meet the Man* (1965) before broadening my scope in the following chapters to include analyses of the diametric masculinities in the world of professional boxing and the black roots of the American punk movement. Engaging with theorists like Judith Butler, bell hooks and Paul Gilroy, *Underground Men* attempts to put these seemingly disparate corners of American life into a dynamic conversation that broadens our understanding through a novel application of critical race, gender and performance theories. Baldwin and his orbiting criticism remain the hub of my investigation throughout, and I use his template of black genius performance outlined in works like *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1967) and *Just Above My Head* (1977) to aid our understanding of how performance prescribes and scrambles dominant narratives about black men after the sexual revolution.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: “SITES OF OPPOSITION”

Perhaps no 20th century American writer theorized performance and race as dynamically, or with as much nuance, as James Baldwin. In his 1960 essay, “Mass Culture and the Creative Artist,” Baldwin comments on the state of American filmmaking with a line that cuts to the quick of this cultural criticism. He says that films like *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *The Defiant Ones* (1958) succeed on their aesthetic merits but fail as social art by “[keeping] the audience at a safe remove from the experience which these films are not therefore really prepared to convey.” Baldwin then sharpens his criticism, calling *The Defiant Ones*’ sentimentalized view of racial reconciliation “one of the latest, and sickest, of the liberal fantasies . . . designed not to trouble, but to reassure” (5). Here I will examine the strategies and implications of Baldwin’s focus on the stage as a means of grappling with the historically problematic relationship between black performers and white audiences. I will rely on the parameters described above in his film criticism, paying special attention to his fictional performers’ capacity to both trouble and reassure the divided culture in which they perform. In short stories like “Sonny’s Blues” and “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” Baldwin conceives performance as a practice that suggests its incapacity for social restitution. This notion represents a departure from Baldwin’s arguments about stagecraft, theater and “representing black subjectivity” elsewhere in his oeuvre (Oforlea 76). In the following pages, among the things I argue is that Baldwin scholars have misread his works because we have paid narrow attention to his reorganization of public images but haven’t adequately considered his theorizations of vulnerability, contradiction and nuance in his portrayal of black male performers.

Examining the stage as a liminal space, I argue that Baldwin’s stories offer a catalogue of

performance types and contexts for performing varieties of psychological fallout attendant to institutionalized racism. Here I hope not only to enrich our experience of the author and his work, but to illuminate the complex social problems that persist at this intersection today. *Underground Men* is a literary and cultural analysis focused on performances of masculinity as they register on various discursive "stages" during the final decades of the 20th century, turning to Baldwin throughout as a guiding critical voice. To this end, my study calls upon a variety of critical race, gender and performance theories in order to examine the potential of "underground" performance practice to push against or confirm popular (mis)perceptions of black men at the center of what Paul Gilroy calls the "interface between black cultural practice and black political aspirations" (12). I move from James Baldwin's examination of black expressive culture in the Jim Crow era, through the underground performance spheres of punk culture in the 70s, and into the diametric racialized framework of professional boxing. While the subjects of these chapters might seem to have little in common, they are held together by challenging existing scholarship announcing the political potency of black male performance. My project embraces Ralph Ellison's "fascination with 'making disparate analyses into rhetorical wholes,'" fusing connections between these corners of American life through their reliance on the stage in negotiating public ideas about black manhood at mid-century and beyond (Ellison xx).

Chapter 2 begins with a reading of the black male performers in Baldwin's story collection, *Going to Meet the Man* (1965), and argues for a reassessment of his confluence of performance practice and social critique. While sharp and productive scholars like Koritha Mitchell have made great strides in furthering our understanding of Baldwin's contribution to performance studies, I push against the notion that his mobilization of the stage seeks always to "expose [national] myths and urge citizens to relinquish them" (Mitchell 33). Baldwin did expose and resist racial narratives

imposed on African Americans through his capacity as a writer and public intellectual. In fact, much of what endures so brilliantly in his work is his penchant for questioning and complicating images of black men in the white cultural imagination. However, I find great use in those moments in his fiction where his performers do not resist the mythologizing gaze of their white audiences. I believe it is important as critics to examine the totality of Baldwin's vision of American society, both as an arrangement with potential for positive change and as a grim, fixed reality for certain participants. I read the performers of *Going to Meet the Man*—focusing on the tragic title character of "Sonny's Blues," along with the anonymous narrator of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon"—as evidence of Baldwin's privileging "the unspeakable pain, the brutal marginalization of generations of silently aching black men" over projecting images of resolve and remedy in the face of such terrorization (Muyumba 90). I read the stage as both an echo chamber for white racial fantasies, as well as a space where that pain could be expressed and, perhaps, transcended. Examining these characters' relationships to the stage in tandem with bell hooks' binary model of black performance, as outlined in her "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," I employ her important distinction between performance as survival and performance as art. This chapter then becomes a pivot point for my proceeding analyses of popular perceptions of black manhood in two distinctly "male-dominated" cultures and subcultures, the American punk movement and the racially-charged organization of professional boxing (Ramírez, Michael 109). Baldwin's focus on the power discrepancy between black male performers and white audiences is the tissue connecting his work and prizefighting, the subject of the following chapter, and his own writing on the sport indicates an acute awareness of its totemic potential for extending and combatting problematic racial narratives.

In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to the public masculinities in the violent world of

professional prizefighting. Here I extend and deepen the examinations of black masculinity and black boxers in Gerald Early's *The Culture of Bruising* (1994). I argue that the storying capacity of white audiences marks the ring's *tabula rasa* canvas with troubling cultural narratives about African American men that dramatize the worst fears of white America. By this, I mean that white audiences have synthesized the "meaning" of these black fighters through their historically privileged capacity as gatekeepers of the American narrative. Building from Mark Anthony Neal's observation that "black men and their issues are always already framed as problems," this chapter focuses on Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson and their capacity to absorb, reflect and problematize white cultural narratives (Neal 5). I argue that the most memorable and iconoclastic bruisers of the last century secured their place in the cultural imagination by challenging what James Baldwin calls "the American effort to avoid dealing with the Negro as a man" (Baldwin "Theater" 17). I study the nonfiction and cinematic representations of these prizefighters in an attempt to reveal new ways of thinking about black male performers in sport and leisure. I am especially interested in Ali's representation on film, and I engage his 1972 biopic *The Greatest* and the much-lauded 1997 documentary *When We Were Kings* as a means to interrogate "the cultural investment in racial narratives belonging and sustaining memberships through performance" (Alexander 44). I still trace my theoretical framework out from Baldwin, as his own writing on the sport communicates with ideas spun out from his fiction regarding the often-troubled relationship between black male performers and white audiences.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the obscured black roots of punk rock music and its orbiting sub-genres. Here I examine how alternative performance practice engenders alternative models of masculinity, and I argue that punk's unique expression of disaffection shares much of its visceral DNA with other African American forms of expressive culture. Returning to Mark Anthony Neal's

notion of "illegible black masculinities," I focus my attention on the 2013 documentary film *A Band Called Death* and attempt to answer its unposed questions about the relationship between punk and its black practitioners. What can forms of "underground" performance practice like punk, post-punk and hardcore tell us about the history and evolution of African American expressive culture? And why might a band like Death—composed of three black brothers from Detroit's east side—be drawn to the fuzzed-out and razor-sharp world of visceral rock music in the first place? I frame these questions in terms of legible and illegible masculinities, approaching punk culture "as a site to play with innovative gender identities" that represents a preemptive strike against the coming cultural shift of the Reagan years (Ramirez 108). Here I use Baldwin's 1979 novel *Just Above My Head* as a template for understanding black male genius performance in the tumultuous build-up to the first term of that pivotal administration and its "backlash against both the countercultural sixties and permissive 70s" (Reynolds 8). Arthur Montana, the gay performer at the center of Baldwin's novel, embodies much of the connective tissue which links "an alternative vernacular of black masculinity" with the contrarian spirit of the punk movement. Furthermore, he continues Baldwin's tradition of rendering "the black musician [as] . . . the restless experimenter who takes apart dominant musical forms and recasts them" (Shin 251). I will explore the significance of Death through Baldwin's template of genius performance as a means to illustrate that the primary difference between the early moments of English and American punk was the contribution of black men, even if those contributions have been reduced by history to the realm of scholarly ephemera.

The central questions of *Underground Men* cycle around conceptions of African American expressive culture and its potential for reimagining and reshaping social realities. My overarching argument is that the storied and tumultuous history of black male performance practice in America

offers a diorama of gendered racial conflict that can't be described unequivocally as either a political boon or liability. These seemingly disparate analyses engage the manner in which their subjects "speak to the politics of race through the constructions of performativity" as an attempt to identify and detail new routes for thinking about the barbed, complex relationship between race, performance and gender as they resonate in "alternative" communities at odds with white hetero culture (Alexander 169). Whether through Baldwin's performance anxieties, the identity politics of the punk movement, or the sculpted masculinities of the square circle, I want this work to advance our conceptions of fluidity in an otherwise rigid world. Scholars like Judith Butler will be useful to this project, as I rely on her conception of gender performance as an entry point to a broader discussion about the popular culture, and the anti-colonial perspective of Frantz Fanon will help me in moments to contextualize this discussion in terms of its diasporic significance. Elsewhere, I rely on Paul Gilroy's examination of expressive culture and bell hooks' binary model of black performance as parcels in a repertoire of critical discourse that brings us closer to an understanding of these troubled and tumultuous moments in American history.

CHAPTER 2

“A DARK BOY, SINGING”: PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AND BLACK MANHOOD IN JAMES BALDWIN’S *GOING TO MEET THE MAN*

The performers populating James Baldwin’s 1965 story collection, *Going to Meet the Man*, offer a crucial point of access for understanding that author’s complex and conflicted relationship to the stage. The first musical performance in “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon” is particularly useful in this respect, and it is loaded with troubling implications for its unnamed, African American expatriate narrator. He takes the stage before an audience of white Americans, his former compatriots, aboard an ocean liner bound for New York: “The moment I stepped out on the floor, they began to smile . . . they were ready to be pleased” (161). As Baldwin traces the provenance of his narrator’s performative relationship with white audiences, he draws into sharp relief the problematic origins of the pleasure described here, along with the broader, darker implications therein. As a black man in the Jim Crow era, he is required to perform both onstage and off as an object of the white male gaze. I argue that scholars writing about Baldwin’s theorization of performance overvalue his use of the stage as a means of “representing black subjectivity,” and that his work is just as concerned with the trappings of performance practice as with its political possibilities (Oforlea 76).

The confluence of social and artistic performance both informs and confounds the narrator’s sense of identity as a black man in a cultural arrangement predicated upon his differentiation, emasculation, and infantilization. Baldwin’s contribution to performance studies is gaining traction in the field, and his work in that capacity is often identified by scholars as one that counteracts culturally dominant (read: white, male, American) racial fantasies of blackness as a state of subjugated complacency. Such scholarship reads Baldwin’s use of artistic expression as a

means to elevate the performer and rupture culturally privileged and problematic representations of black manhood. However, the public posture assumed by the narrator of "This Morning" concretizes rather than confronts these fantasies, dramatizing his status as the castrated, infantilized subordinate. This speaks to Baldwin's tendency to embrace vulnerability and nuance in his representations of black men, as well as the capacity of performance practice to draw such aspects into stark relief. While critics like Koritha Mitchell and Aaron Oforlea have recently identified the stage elsewhere in Baldwin's corpus as a site for performing black subjectivity, it operates here as one in which images of the emasculated black Other are reproduced in order to appease and confirm the social order of the Jim Crow era.

While Mitchell argues clearly and convincingly for a closer look at Baldwin's "critical and creative" encounters with the stage, this chapter is concerned primarily with moments in his work where these political possibilities break down (33). It is in this breakdown that "This Morning" engages in an interesting and complex conversation with Baldwin's more widely-read "Sonny's Blues," preceding it in the collection. Both feature a black male musical performer—the eponymous Sonny of "Sonny's Blues," and the anonymous musician and narrator of "This Morning"—and both stories, while pursuing significantly different routes in this respect, interrogate the possibilities and limitations of performing black male bodies as "sight[s] of public and private contestations," emphasizing the devastating effects of urban blight and institutionalized racism, respectively (Neal 5). Sonny has a performative subjectivity inaccessible to the unnamed narrator of "This Morning," whose public pose dramatizes his subordinate status. Furthermore, the former assumes the proverbial spotlight of the story's title while the latter remains anonymous despite his storying capacity as narrator. Sonny's agency as a performer generates from the freedom to express himself and his pain as a recovering heroin addict in the jazz clubs of

Harlem, and his centrality to the story's title—despite the fact that it's his brother, not Sonny, who is telling it—indicates a subjectivity not afforded to the narrating musician and actor of "This Morning."

Reading the legacy of African American musical performance as "a metaphor for the official social code," I seek here to *decode* Baldwin's rendering of these performers as they relate to the reconfiguration of black manhood and its public images (Black 624). Such an analysis will provide a more lucid understanding of the complex, barbed relationship between representation and the institutionalized racism of mid-century America, as well as the psychological mechanisms governing the myth of racial difference writ large. "This Morning" forces a direct and intimate encounter with these mechanisms, contributing a holistic image of emasculation and of the "discursive dissonance" between the authentic and presented self in a culture determined to define the representations of its subordinates (Oforlea 133). Baldwin, who often "deployed his pain and trauma as a technique to produce writing," is concerned here more with the wound than the suture, examining how this otherness is internalized, as well as the manner in which it informs everyday social interaction and transcends geographic boundaries (Zaborowska 149). As such, it is difficult to argue that Baldwin is in this moment "locating agency in the black actor, not the audience," and privileging the stage as a space where African American performers could lay claim to the dynamic personhood that evaded them in the broader experience of American life (Mitchell 34).[1] If we understand the totality of Baldwin's iconoclastic vision as one willing to contradict itself and gesture in sometimes seemingly conflicting directions, we become more nimble as cultural critics and more adept at diagnosing the dynamic social problems that persist at this intersection between

[1] Long works like *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and *Just Above My Head* (1979) do put his performers in such positions of access, as Oforlea and Mitchell note, but I argue the lack of personal and performative agency in "This Morning" represents a significant counter narrative necessary to understanding the full breadth of Baldwin's theorization of performance practice.

performance, race and masculinity.

Baldwin demonstrates throughout the length of “This Morning” the various performing poses that, while essential to the day-to-day negotiations necessary for navigating a violently racist society, provide little in the way of empowerment. For our purposes, the term “performance” will be used in reference to any moment in which some sort of public posture is assumed in order to communicate something otherwise hidden from view or, as is the wont of Baldwin’s narrator, to obscure from the audience something central and true to the performer. Despite the narrator’s attempts to keep American notions of these performance areas at bay, they permeate both public and private spheres, from the stage to the bedroom. bell hooks’ “Performance Practice As a Site of Opposition,” can help us navigate this, as she identifies two modes that govern black performance: one that “is used to manipulate in the interests of survival . . . and performance as ritual play (as art)” (210). Baldwin’s narrator participates in both modes, and it is useful to keep this binary model of black performance in mind while engaging this text, as these seemingly disparate categories are put into a complex and problematic conversation. Both the narrator’s performance-as-survival technique as well as the “ritual play” of his musical performances create dissonance between the narrator’s sense of himself as a man and the public presentation of that manhood, creating a social dynamic between the narrator and white society in which he must “plan [his] moves in accordance with what [he knows] of their cowardice and their needs and their strategy” (164). While the narrator is aware of the “cowardice” from which the dominant Jim Crow culture operates, he recognizes it as a hunger which must be satisfied in order to ensure his survival. This is true on the stage as well, as it is necessary to appease the same audience for whom a performing black body is “a profound reassurance” (161). The two modes of performance, as survival technique and artistic expression, become twinned here in a significant way, rendering the

concept of performance writ large as a technique for engaging white culture on its own terms. It becomes difficult, then, to read the stage as Koritha Mitchell does in Baldwin's wider oeuvre, as an integral site where stereotypical notions of blackness are dispelled and re-organized. Throughout the course of this chapter, I will examine the stage—rendered traditionally under the spotlight, or in "the theatricality of everyday life"—as a source of anxiety that hinders authentic expression and reinforces problematic ideas of black masculinity (Mitchell 34).

Performance practice is for Baldwin a multi-purpose instrument in the African American struggle for selfhood, and understanding the nuance with which that instrument is employed helps us to understand Baldwin's subtle craft as an artist and cultural critic. "Sonny's Blues" tells the story of two brothers reunited after a painful separation during which Sonny, the younger and more introspective of the pair, pursues a career as a jazz pianist, entering into the genre's social sphere and the storied exploits therein. Sonny develops a heroin problem which eventually leads to his incarceration, while his brother, the story's unnamed narrator—an educator and father—struggles to understand the divergent paths of two brothers' response to life on the troubled streets of Harlem. Baldwin renders the troubled family history of these diverging brothers in order to examine the power of the stage, the call of community, and the centrality of family in the struggle against Jim Crow's violent fallout. The political possibilities of performance practice are overvalued in this tri-fold model of struggle by scholars like Mitchell and Oforlea, whose reading of Baldwin as performance theorist resonates in the author's relationship to theater but becomes complicated by his stories that quietly demonstrate the complexities, contradictions, and limits of cultural expression as a means of self liberation. In this light, "Sonny's Blues" represents an extremely nuanced problematization of those readings that place Baldwin's performers at the epicenter of what Paul Gilroy calls the "interface between black cultural practice and black

political aspirations" (12). Here Baldwin demonstrates with equal measure the potential and the limits of performance as a social instrument with the capacity to reshape the brutal realities of life as a black man in the Jim Crow era.

It is significant not only that Baldwin places both "Sonny's Blues" and "This Morning" in such close proximity to one another, but also that he has chosen to play on the concepts of naming in stories that examine the centrality of public representation to the experiences of African-American men. Agency and identity (or the lack thereof) are concepts central to the performers of both stories, and while each piece employs these elements differently, Baldwin focuses on the raw pain associated with their denial. Sonny has a performative agency inaccessible to the unnamed narrator of "This Morning," whose performance dramatizes his status as the black Other of the Jim Crow era, and the former assumes the proverbial spotlight of the story's title while the latter remains anonymous despite his storying capacity as narrator. Sonny's agency as a performer comes from his freedom to express himself and the pain of his experiences as a young black man in Harlem, and his centrality to the story's title indicates a self-actualization not afforded to the unnamed musician of the proceeding piece. I find critic Keith Clark's reading useful in this respect, as he emphasizes the degree to which "Baldwin foregrounds performance, voice and community as the vehicles through which black men wrestle with and re-negotiate their identities" (34). It is the "wrestling" with identity, not the mastery of it, which captures Baldwin's attention here. And when Sonny tries to explain to his brother his desire to dedicate his life to playing jazz, he is in fact trying to explain a deeper truth about himself. His brother, skeptical in his association of jazz musicians with hedonistic "good-time people," is incredulous:

> "Are you *serious*?"
> "Hell, yes, I'm serious."
> He looked more helpless than ever, and annoyed, and deeply hurt.

> I suggested, helpfully: “You mean—like Louis Armstrong?”
> His face closed as though I’d struck him. “No. I’m not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap” (120).

Sonny’s unwillingness to be associated with “that old-time, down home crap” speaks to the parameters of his vision in a larger project of self-invention, and he imagines the stage as a liminal space in which to launch that project. He doesn’t want to resemble the safe and nostalgic models of black performers, embodied here by Louis Armstrong, despite Armstrong’s status as “a courageous . . . force in [America’s] racial politics” (Merod 165). Sonny sees more value in a performer like Charlie Parker, placing himself in proximity to jazz’s explosive and unpredictable young guard more akin to the “good-time” culture which he is convinced his brother will never understand. It is helpful here to consult Frantz Fanon, who in *The Wretched of the Earth* examines American jazz in terms of the response of “indigenous style” to colonial expectations of art. According to these expectations, “jazz could only be the broken, desperate yearning of an old ‘Negro’ . . . [but] as soon as he understands himself and apprehends the world differently . . . it is obvious he will blow his horn to his heart’s content and is husky voice will ring out loud and clear” (176). It is Sonny’s desperate search for an “indigenous style,” distinct from the black cultural production of the past, which marks his relationship to music and its performance; and it is also, in tandem with the systemic racism which has shattered their family unit, what sends him spiraling into the void of addiction. His brother could here be read as sympathetic to the colonial expectations described by Fanon, which in turn color his own social performance as an educator and family man. The act of keeping one’s head down, so to speak, informs his brother’s broader worldview and contributes to the posture he assumes in his day-to-day experience. While Sonny’s attempt to renegotiate the terms of his own identity through his performative pose indicates a level of self-actualizing potential in the stage, Baldwin demonstrates that the process of liberation is

infinitely more complicated than simply finding one's voice, and much of the critical energy here and elsewhere underscores the woundedness, not the empowerment, which marks Sonny's performative quest for selfhood.

With so much cultural energy expended on defining what black manhood is and is not, Baldwin demonstrates how it must be performed within the parameters of these social expectations that regard the assertion of sameness as a threat to white masculine superiority. The slippery notion of authenticity emerges as a central concept in understanding this framework, as "black authenticity has increasingly become linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations" (Johnson 48). The power dynamic relies on Fanon's "masked" black subject whose survival depends upon a presentation that authenticates his position as an emasculated subordinate, rather than one that communicates *authentically*, thereby confirming and "inform[ing] the construction of white masculinity" against which that subject's inferiority is read (Hughey 95). Having fled America to find artistic success as a musician and actor in Paris, the anonymous narrator of "This Morning" begrudgingly returns to the United States upon his mother's death, serving as a sort of measure by which he imagines his impending, and more permanent, return with his family in tow. It is here, after the stage performance which opens this chapter, that Baldwin demonstrates the degree to which black men must perform as inferior in order to survive Jim Crow's cultural gauntlet. The narrator is greeted in the first-class lounge by white policemen checking passports, one of whom questions him "with a grin meant to hide more than it revealed, which hideously revealed more than it could hide," setting the stage for an interaction built around false exteriors and a clearly established power dynamic (163). The narrator manages to squirm his way through this exchange, returning their revealing grins with "what [he] hope[s] [is] a calm, open smile," and noting that his own proficiency at this type of social performance has dulled during his years across

the Atlantic, as he "had once known how to pitch [his] voice precisely between curtness and servility, and known what razor's edge of a pickaninny's smile would turn away wrath" (163). This moment exposes the narrator's experience of racial interaction in America as a sort of delicate playacting consistent with hooks' first mode of black performance, in which one must assume a castrated and infantilized posture in order to survive in the Jim Crow era. If the narrator were to betray that "pickaninny's smile" and engage the officers as a man engages other men, the result of this implied sameness would have disastrous, even violent, ramifications. The narrator reflects on the impossibility of authentic communication in such scenarios:

> The cop says, "Hey, boy. Come over here." So you go on over. He says "Boy, I believe you're drunk." And, you see, if you say, "No, no sir," he'll beat you because you're calling him a liar. And if you say anything else, unless it's something to make him laugh, he'll take you in and beat you, just for fun. The trick is to think of some way for them to have their fun without beating you up (173).

The perverse game described here is unwinnable. Authenticity is a liability in Jim Crow's America, where "[d]eference, or the appearance of it at least, had to be communicated by appropriate body language: submissive gestures, modest deportment, and suitably downcast eyes" (White 155). The possibility of an "authentic" and expressive black masculinity becomes increasingly slim throughout "This Morning," as so much of the mid-century American social order depends on its silencing and deferment. The practice of performance, both on stage and off, functions in Baldwin's story as yet another space whose parameters are set and policed by white men.

"This Morning" alludes to the emerging African American Civil Rights movement and its potential for correcting the social imbalances that have created this suffering, but social justice is not at the center of its events. Before we can correct the ills operating against black communities, texts like this one and "Sonny's Blues" contend that we must first come to terms with its effect on

the individual and the psychological ramifications of institutionalized oppression. Keith Clark's contention that Baldwin uses performance as an entry point to the interior lives of black men resonates in both texts, but his claim that Baldwin's groundbreaking energy lies in his "refus[al] to portray black males as long-suffering, perpetually victimized by . . . white society" falls short in describing the degree to which Baldwin mobilizes victimized masculinity and the raw pain of systemic dehumanization (34). A legacy of suffering played out across generations of African American men is central to "This Morning," which forces the reader to engage that suffering on a direct and personal level, and "Sonny's Blues," which both celebrates and acknowledges the limitations of cultural expression in the ever-evolving struggle for black liberation in the United States. A lifetime of emasculative performance has left Baldwin's anonymous narrator "full of nightmares," and Baldwin's interrogative energy is focused more here on the wide-ranging effects of these nightmares than the social confrontation necessary to undo them (Baldwin 145). Performance provides a window into that psychology, but it operates in "This Morning" as an instrument of obscurity designed to obliterate the notion of black masculine sameness. The distancing effect of the narrator's various performative poses reinforces the chasm between authenticity and presentation, demonstrating the degree to which black men were marooned in the mid-century American crowd through the insulating capacity of sustained emasculative performance.

Koritha Mitchell's examination of Baldwin's use of performance is in proximity to Clark's reading of empowerment, and it is likewise unable to account for the many-tiered implications of black masculine performance in stories like "This Morning" and "Sonny's Blues." Rather than "[seeking] to destroy the 'sociological and sentimental image' of African Americans that corroborates national fantasies," (Mitchell 34) stories like these demonstrate that Baldwin also

used the stage as a space where the black performers would "find themselves trapped in . . . an 'iron maiden' of mannerisms" (Baldwin, "Theater" 16). While Mitchell's analysis rings true in his larger corpus—especially in regard to Baldwin's 1968 novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*—the stage and its potential for social change functions here in a decidedly different way. Barbara, a character close to the central performer in *Train*, remarks that playacting "made a connection . . . between a private sorrow and a public, a revolutionary situation" (298). The performer in "This Morning" is not afforded this connection, and the stage is for him a site that is neither critical nor creative, operating instead a space for the narrator to assuage the appetite of a white audience for whom "nothing was more familiar . . . than the sight of a dark boy, singing, and there were few things on earth more necessary" (161). His performative state, operating here under hooks' second model of "ritual play," is built upon replicating the very notions of race and masculinity Mitchell sees disrupted in other contexts. As much of Baldwin's energy as a cultural critic is spent "warn[ing] Americans that we are all doomed if we continue to deny our relationship to one another," his use of performance to solidify dominant and problematic notions regarding that relationship should be read as such a warning, whose stakes extend beyond the page and implicate an entire nation (Mitchell 45).

The narrator's artistic pose is essentially a dramatization of his social performance with the white officers, in which sameness is underplayed in order to confirm white society's preconceived notions of racial structure and "the American effort to avoid dealing with the Negro as a man" (Baldwin, "Theater" 17). The two categories of performance are thus collapsed into one sustained survival technique. As such, it's hard to identify moments in which the narrator is afforded the public stature of anything more than "a dark boy, singing." Upon disembarking the New York-bound liner, he is greeted immediately by a barking man in uniform who refers to him as "boy,"

eliciting in the narrator a strange sense of comfort, a feeling of being at home, and a reflection upon performance: "I thought of a song I sometimes sang, *When will I ever get to be a man?*" (165). This moment offers a clear conflation of these twin performative modes, as the narrator's social performance triggers the memory of an artistic one, both sharing a point of commonality in the narrator's inability to transcend his deflated manhood. This twinning is significant in that it portrays African American experience of cross-racial interaction in terms that are strictly survivalist and consistently inauthentic, leaving seemingly little room for significant social progress. However, even though Baldwin's focus is on wounded black masculinity and its wide-ranging psychological effects, the narrator's experience of performance in France indicates that doom and despair are not this story's endgame.

While the performing posture assumed by the narrator of "This Morning" in the United States doesn't challenge dominant racial fantasies, his crossing the Atlantic awakens him to the expressive possibilities of the performing arts and illustrates the potential for productivity through his distinctly American pain. Paris offers the anonymous narrator a respite his high-stakes social performance in America, but the psychological scars remain. It is here that he meets his wife, Harriet, in the city that allows them to exist as an interracial couple. "If Harriet had been born in America," he observes, "it would have taken her a long time, perhaps forever, to look on me as a man like other men . . . [and] I would never have been able to look on her as a woman like all other women. The habits of public rage and power would have also been our private compulsions, and would have blinded our eyes" (150). Here is the story's most explicit rendering of the chasm which separates the racial performances in France and the United States. Sight and seeing are crucial in this reflection, and they should be read here literally: while it's true that, in this imagined American scenario, the narrator cannot consider a white woman like Harriet as a possible romantic partner,

the social parameters of Jim Crow's America dictate that he is not to gaze upon her at all. Thus, the narrator's restriction is described in more finite terms: while it may have taken a white woman like Harriet "a long time" to recognize him in romantic terms, he "would never have been able" to do the same, as the dictates of their respective racial performances afford varying levels of flexibility in an American context. The performance aspect is further built into the omnipresence of "public rage," a senseless audience with the power to permeate the private experience, from which one's inner motivations must be obscured. This audience is allegedly non-existent in Paris, where the narrator contends "people were too busy with their own lives, their private lives, to make fantasies about [his], to set up walls around [his]" (175). The narrator possesses a sort of masculine agency in Paris, this ability to be seen as "a man like other men," which is a luxury not afforded to him in the United States. We return to the notion of masculine sameness and its threat to the American white male power structure. The white monopoly on patriarchy is much less pronounced in France; however, coming of age in the American theater of discrimination has left its mark on the narrator who is unable to divorce himself entirely from the psychological remnants of this long-running emasculating performance.

Paris provides a space where relationships like the narrator's and Harriet's can flourish, but it is complicated by his painful past in the brutal spotlight of American racial tension. Under the direction of French filmmaker Jean Luc Vidal, the narrator draws on his American experiences of emasculation in order to produce an "authentic" performance in his breakthrough film, a move that characterizes Baldwin's penchant for finding productivity in painful experiences while also demonstrating the deep scarring potential of institutionalized racism. The narrator's "nightmares" of social performance in America inform his work as an artist in France, revealing what Vidal calls "the reality behind the reality of [his] performance" as Chico, a troubled character of mixed racial

ancestry who, during the scene in question, must grovel for demeaning work in a Pigalle dance hall (174). On set, Vidal accuses the narrator of giving an inauthentic performance, of "playing [Chico] as if [he] thought of him as a noble savage," which reveals and problematizes the narrator's original inclination to derive inspiration from his experience with North Africans in Paris (168). Vidal encourages the narrator to look inward, prompting him to reflect on his time in America, saying "the situation is not so pretty there for boys like you" (169). Again, the narrator is referred to as a "boy," and it is precisely the emasculating effect of this word, twinned with his accusation that the narrator is performing like "those English lady actresses who love to play putain as long as it is always absolutely clear to the audience that they are really ladies," (169) which pulls the narrator into an "authentic" and critically lauded performance. Interestingly, emasculation operates here as both a symptom of American racism and a catalyst for change. This "reality behind the reality," it turns out, is a complex network of fears and lived experiences—the extent of which is not completely expressed verbally, even to Vidal—deeply ingrained in the daily humiliations of American public life as a black man at mid century. This contributes to the narrator's fears for his own son, Paul, as they face their imminent return to the United States:

> I wonder if [Vidal] knows the nightmare at the bottom of my mind, as I played the role of Chico, was all the possible fates of Paul. This is but another way of saying that I relived the disasters which had nearly undone me; but, because I was thinking of Paul, I discovered that I did not want my son ever to feel toward me as I had felt toward my own father . . . I had watched the humiliations he had to bear, and I had pitied him. (172)

There's a lot to unpack here, but the most crucial element of the narrator's revelation is this concept of "humiliation" which carries a public connotation and speaks to the type of performative prowess necessary to engage socially from an "inferior" position in the United States. One cannot be

humiliated, after all, if there is no audience to define it. Much like the disturbing reminiscence of the public sexual assault of his sister Louisa's friend as a teenager, carried out by uniformed officers against the spotlight of their own car's headlights—the men in the car staring on, helpless against what the narrator earlier describes as the "force [which] jeopardized [his] right, [his] power, to possess and to protect a woman" (158)—we see the manner in which those who hold power in Jim Crow's America perform in order to maintain that power. This line betrays the culture's problematic perception of women as objects to be "possessed" and "protected," and the degree to which it informs ideas about white masculinity at mid-century. "They want you to feel like you're not a man," the narrator observes, "maybe that's the only way they can feel like men" (175). The narrator has seen this effect on his father, which has bred in him a sort of helpless resentment, and is struck by the fear that his son will bear witness to similar humiliating performances, robbing the narrator of his agency as a father and, as a result, his manhood.

The notion of escape deeply informs much of Baldwin's theorization of performance practice. This notion comes vividly to life in "Sonny's Blues," which demonstrates the allure of the stage for its title character as a method for claiming the dynamic personhood which evades him in his broader experience of American life. Paul Gilroy helps us to understand performance on these terms, through his threefold model of the expressive arts' historical response to social adversity. "[The arts]," he writes, "reconciled their producers to their sublime plight and offered them a measure of compensation for it while also providing a partial refuge from its most malevolent effects." This component of Gilroy's model applies here; however, while he heralds "a tradition of culture-making that resists the verdict of redundancy to which its own bleak history points," Baldwin's focus in "Sonny's Blues" is more concerned with the failure to break free of

the circular pattern of suffering to which his characters are resolved (Gilroy 13). It becomes significantly harder, then, to place this story within Baldwin's tradition of "challenging uniform beliefs about African American experiences and narrow representations of black masculinity" (Oforlea 79). We find ourselves returning here to notions of power, as Baldwin demonstrates that the ability to "escape" one's reality is not as simple as finding agency on the stage, or otherwise fulfilling a spiritual desire of self expression. The legacy of suffering the brutal arrangement of institutionalized racism, far from underplayed, is very much central to Baldwin's interrogation of performance practice which demonstrates that the game is still, in a sense, rigged, and no amount of performative catharsis, however central to the lived experience of African American men, can undo it. Performance practice is necessary for the health of the inner life but what, these stories ask, are its pragmatic applications? What Baldwin tells us with these performers is that artistic expression may enrich the inner life of the performer, like "the life Sonny lived inside," while offering a catharsis which may in fact *feel* like a transcendence of sorts, cannot single-handedly alter the inner life of the culture (Baldwin 110).

True to Baldwin's history of embracing contradiction, performance functions in both texts both in tandem with and as a subtle critique of Ralph Ellison's description of the blues as a form, "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it" (129). There is something notably insular in Ellison's description, and a similar inwardness is communicated in both "Sonny's Blues" and "This Morning." There is no outward projection here, as "Baldwin shifts the quest for subjectivity from the external to the internal, from the political to the personal, and from the social to the spiritual" (Clark 34). The psychological benefits of selfhood, and the stage's contribution to it here, should not be undersold; however, we misread Baldwin if we do not consider the totality

with which he approaches his performers and their (in)capacity to affect the social world in which they perform. To misread Baldwin in this particular way—to, in effect, overvalue "the meaning-making power of performance" (Mitchell 34) without also considering its limitations as a mimetic device—is to misread the stakes of the struggle for equality in a social arrangement so heavily dependent on power in affecting substantive social change. "It had been a long time since I had sung for so many Americans," the narrator of "This Morning" remarks before the performance which opens this chapter. "Still, I was a great hit with them . . . . Just the same, no matter how industrious and brilliant some of the musicians had been, or how devoted my audience, they did not know, they could not know, what my songs came out of" (160). This impenetrable division between knowable and unknowable, between audience and performer, might be both stories' most conclusive feature regarding the various aspects of performativity in relation to their central figures' experiences of black male self identity. Even in France, where the stakes of social performance are markedly lower than those of Jim Crow's United States, the anonymous narrator assumes a posture designed to distance his audience—be it his director Vidal, his wife Harriet, or his public admirers writ large—from the painful inspiration of his performance. Through many formative years of playacting as the inferior, castrated subordinate, all white-toothed smiles and affirmative joviality, he is left haunted by the specter of this American performance. It transcends public space, following the narrator into his most intimate relationships, leaving him plagued most notably with the fear of raising his son on the stage responsible for the very humiliations which define his public self. Baldwin's story ends with a note of uncertainty, leaving us with the image of the narrator and his son, ascending in "the cage" of an apartment elevator—an image connoting restriction in one sense, an observable space in another—bound, for better or worse, for "the new world" (193). Still, they're moving upward, providing room for optimism and the hope that the

narrator may return to the United States as a more empowered performer, before an audience whose lived experience of these performative dynamics is in the process of being upended by a civil rights movement seeking to dismantle the hierarchies created therein. While it's tempting to read Baldwin's use of the stage as an exercise in communal dissidence, the performers discussed heretofore demonstrate that Baldwin's performance theory is a much more complicated machine whose various moving parts indicate the complexities of black manhood in a society built around its systemic negation.

CHAPTER 3

CAN THE BRUISER SPEAK? PRIZEFIGHTING AND THE PUBLIC GAZE

> "*Race is not just a political concept, but also a complex historical construction composed of a series of categories, each deriving its meaning from how it is contingent upon and comparable to the other. For instance, white has meaning only as it relates to black — or to anything else that is not white. It has no meaning in and of itself.*"
>
> - Gerald Early

Gerald Early spoke the words above at a panel, "Race in the Age of Obama," which took place in the summer of 2011 at Washington University in St. Louis. This utterance occurs eleven years after the findings of the Human Genome Project, which revealed race to be a largely social phenomenon devoid of a substantive genetic basis, and nearly seventeen years after the release of Early's 1994 collection, *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature and Modern Culture*. While he could not have anticipated the results of the mapping of the entire human genome, a project three years underway at the time of his writing, Early's collection gestures toward the social composition of racial difference by emphasizing the natural energy of opposition in terms of the social and political legacy of boxing. In the "theoretical prelude" to that text, Early identifies his subject, bruising, as "a kind of dumb play of the human crisis of identity in the modern society" (xiv). This is a natural point of entry for engaging Early's work and his broader theorization of race and society, as it typifies much of what is significant about his cultural investigation. It is the "dumb play" of the prizefight, its systemic obliteration of nuance and shading, which lends the event its power in codifying notions of racial and gendered identity. From the mythic inheritance of *Kid Galahad* (1937) to the primitivism of "war machine" Ray LaMotta, *The Culture of Bruising* examines the reduction of the complex drama of American culture to a binary system neatly composed of actions and their opposites. In this schema, what is not black is white; what is not trickster is bruiser; and what is not savage is gentlemanly. The play—or

violence—of difference and opposition, essential to the social constructions known colloquially as race and gender, are central to any meaning to which the prizefight seeks to lay claim. In pursuing this line of inquiry we find ourselves participating in a larger conversation about the power of sport, which "provides the comfort of nostalgia, the power of myth, and one of the few sets of sellable traditions that the mass public can be seduced into purchasing," (Early 17) and its peerless capacity to present male bodies as sites which absorb and reflect popular prejudices, cultural anxieties and political ideologies.

The boxing canvas becomes an integral site of projection for these sorts of prejudices, anxieties and ideologies, as it formally positions the brute force of one male body against another, of one symbol against its antithesis, an action and its reaction. The sport itself, Early tells us, is "devoid of any political content except ritualized male anger turned into a voyeuristic fetish," (xiv). As such, the role of the spectating mass becomes invaluable to boxing's symbolic economy, as it is the cultural gaze that imbues the fight with its meaning as a "symbolic discourse" (8). This chapter seeks to extend and deepen Early's analysis of the storied space of the boxing canvas with special focus on the storying capacity of white audiences and investors in marking the blankness of the prizefight with problematic narratives about African American men. The most memorable and iconoclastic bruisers of the 20th century have garnered their significance as cultural touchstones in relation to their negotiation with, or resistance to, the white gaze; and some, from "cultural trickster" Muhammad Ali to the "animal" Mike Tyson, skillfully built their public identities by obliterating the boundaries set for black male bodies by white audiences, promoters and sponsors (Hoffer 37). Thus, these fighters remain faithful to the sport's legacy of danger by consistently performing (sometimes literally) on the edge of illegality as defined and designed by those three groups. Once again, James Baldwin's contribution as a cultural critic can help us

navigate these waters, as he built a lasting literary career performing outside of reductive cultural systems. Coupling his own writing on the sport with his broader theorization of race and masculinity, I will examine how fighters like Ali and Tyson fashioned bold public personas and, like many African American boxers before and after, were the projection site for white America's fear of black male sexuality, cast as players in the illusory "Good Negro"/"Bad Negro" binary. I will continue to build upon Early's ideas throughout, in tandem with scholars such as Kath Woodward and popular sports writers like Richard Hoff, applying them to the sport's most iconic and iconoclastic black bodies as represented in film and the popular culture. My specific aim here is to interrogate the elaborately built categories of race and gender as they relate to the diametric space of the fabled square circle with an eye toward "the social world in which the sport is performed and experienced" (Woodward 127). I will unpack this concept by acknowledging the boxing canvas as a made space, a *tabula rasa* where public images of race and manhood are projected and positioned to battle for privilege in the cultural imaginary, the story of who we are and why.

The narrative built around the championship bout between Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson, for example, casts the challenger Liston as the damaged and dangerous bruiser, with Patterson performing the role of the princely, accommodating elder statesman. In this peculiar "context of whites watching two black men trying to beat each other's brains out," the reductive space of the boxing canvas pares the two fighters down to essentialized and opposing forces, molding their violent masculine contest into "1960s liberalism's finest symbolic hour" (Early 54). In this framework, Patterson graciously extends to Liston an invitation to propel himself upward from his humble beginnings, a narrative Early reads in tandem with the state of American liberalism, vis-à-vis President John F. Kennedy's sympathy toward the plight of the

disproportionately incarcerated African American man, adding that "black imprisonment, specifically black *male* imprisonment, haunted not only the liberal imagination but the entire national consciousness" (48). Early demonstrates how, from the halls of Presidential power to the diverse body of writing orbiting the match, the narrative made to lend significance to the brawl reveals more about the political flame in which it is forged than it does about any qualities the fighters themselves might possess. It is only in opposition to Liston's brutishness, for instance, that Patterson's gentility is legible. Despite his honorable reputation, Patterson's meaning as a fighter—along with the broader, projected narrative of race and politics spun largely by white sports writers to "explain" the '62 heavyweight championship—would be *made different* if the opposing space in the event's binary arrangement were occupied by a beloved and "mythical" white contender like Rocky Marciano (Early 12). It is in this manner that the contest must make sense and contain a meaning beyond the "dumb play" of bruising in order to justify its privileged position in the national consciousness.

Just as Baldwin draws on the power of the spectator in his own performance theory, Early reads the audience in order to examine the degree to which its cultural anxieties are fed into the reductive system of the prizefight. These anxieties privilege dominant notions regarding those areas of categorization and division which rely on stark oppositions and cultural consensus in order to create "meaning" within its own fictions. Here I find great use in an observation by Ishmael Reed, who so deftly gestures to the language of the prizefight—which, significantly, distinguishes between "disputed" and "undisputed" champions (qtd. in Early 20)—in order to destabilize the concept of the sport's inherent meaning. There is nothing intrinsically *meaningful*, for example, in Sonny Liston's "baffling, bruising" victory over "the moral favorite" Floyd Patterson; rather, the fight owes its significance as a polemic gesture to the national mood and the (de)constructing force

of white gazing culture (Baldwin 171). James Baldwin reports on the Patterson-Liston brawl with a realization it "carried political implications given the representations of masculinity and blackness embodied by the two fighters," providing a point of contact for examining the degree to which the square circle reduces the contours of race and masculinity (Muyumba 89). As I have demonstrated, Baldwin often announces through performance notions of black representation geared toward white audiences that cycle around the complex challenges of acquiring power and defeating racial narratives. Dovetailing Early's writing on the sport with Baldwin's "focus on the domestic representations of identity as spectacle and performance," I will transfer these notions that to the unorthodox "performance" practice of prizefighting, illustrating the manner in which white audiences and investors project cultural narratives onto the boxing ring and the jaw-smashing male bodies it contains (Zaborowska 142).

I. Trickster in the Funhouse: Ali on Film

In order to more closely examine this aspect of projected meaning as it relates to male bodies in violent contest, we ought to approach moments of the sport's popular history where this arrangement seems on the verge of coming apart. In his book *Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony*, Charles Lemert reads Ali through his legacy of myth-making and identity formation as "queering the world . . . work[ing] against a received cultural system under conditions where little can be done to overthrow an oppressive political formation" (81). Ali performs his very elaborate cultural trick, Lemert argues, by dancing around the binary structure so emphasized in Early's assessment of the prizefighting culture. "Ali broke the cultural mold into which black men were forced," Lemert writes. "Try as the cultural process might, it could not fit him into the Good/Bad Negro scheme, and thus it could not figure his racial nature against white fear of the

darkness" (80). Ali then represents an interesting complication to the notion that one's meaning as a bruiser is entirely constructed by the cultural forces operating on the boxing canvas. In fact, few other fighters in modern history have so actively lobbied on behalf of their own mythic status as Muhammad Ali.[2] Yet, while Ali may have been arguably the most successful bruiser to negotiate the terms of his own image as a cultural icon, we find that the oppositional energy of boxing's spatial framework and the power of the gaze still illuminate much of his significance as a fighter.

I turn here to film, arguably the most "built" of all mass art forms, and its unmatched potential in totalizing and representing bodies to a large audience. Tom Gries' 1977 Muhammad Ali biopic *The Greatest*—starring, bizarrely, Ali himself—offers an excellent opportunity for us to examine the transfer of a made icon from the material sphere to an object of art. The film captures Ali on the receiving end of a white director's lens, but it also offers Ali's reading of himself as the star of his life story. The film opens on a pastoral note, with the iconoclastic fighter shadowboxing in an open field. George Benson's "The Greatest Love of All" swells, while the opening titles scroll over Ali as he glides and jabs throughout a sun-drenched prairie with his trademark butterfly grace. There is something jarring about the image of The People's Champion sans people, alone in an open space, assuming the bruiser's pose while unencumbered by the four corners of the boxing ring. It's Ali out of context, unopposed by another male body and with complete freedom of movement. He is at once, impossibly, bigger than his already gargantuan public image—the Greatest, the People's Champion, the Louisville Lip—and also more fluid, somehow a part of the scenery. As such, it's an appropriate note on which to approach the prizefight's reliance on difference and reductive space in its violent quest for meaning. While Early doesn't directly

[2] Ali's image has so defiantly transcended the sort of reductive attempts at classification identified by Lemert that the famous photo of from the second Ali-Liston bout—with Ali looming over his stunned and prostrate challenger—graces the cover of Edward McCrorie's 2012 translation of *The Iliad.*

reference the film in his collection, *The Greatest* typifies much of what is significant about the cultural investigation conducted in *The Culture of Bruising*. Playing as a strange "epic of the male's holy quest in popular culture's heart of darkness," demonstrating the power of the gaze, the power of the reductive frame, and the necessity of an opposing male body in synthesizing meaning within the "preposterous theatre" of the prizefight (Early 34).

The fight itself is an inherently senseless arrangement, a brawl whose meaning is external and determined by its audience. The fight's constructed significance as a racialized diorama, and a larger "metaphor for the philosophical and social condition of men," leads us to a necessary conversation about the elaborately built categories we know as race and masculinity (Early (xiv). Kath Woodward's sprawling *Boxing, Masculinity and Identity: The 'i' of the Tiger* (2007) continues in the tradition of Early's analysis of boxing's social framework, and includes a particularly useful emphasis on the relationship between sport and story which is especially useful in approaching Ali's rendering in *The Greatest*. Approaching stories—told in the gym, in the media, and in the more structured narratives of film and literature—"as a means of making sense of how we are positioned and position ourselves" strengthens our understanding of the prizefight as an arrangement whose meaning occurs outside of the ring and requires a storying audience (Woodward 91).[3] While a fighter like Muhammad Ali engages in a substantial amount of self mythologizing, it's the story we tell about him—in relation to the broader national narratives of Vietnam, the state of the counterculture and race relations, and the history of the prizefight—that imbues his status as a brawler with significance. This speaks to Early's emphasis on the "connection between oral culture, masculine aggression, and prizefighting," and, for our purposes here, the fragility and made-ness of narrative itself (Early 28). Stories, after all, require an author

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[3] James Baldwin, for example, says that he "[knew] nothing whatsoever about . . . the Poor Boy's Game [boxing]. But [he knew] a lot about the poor boy's pride, since that's [his] story" ("The Fight" 170).

who edits, embellishes, and makes a complex of other decisions that contribute to the telling. If boxing requires narrative to synthesize meaning, which in turn tells the story of race and manhood in America, then we must acknowledge the instability of narrative itself in order to arrive at a more holistic understanding of their implications. Just as a legible reading of the Liston-Patterson bout requires the narrative of American liberalism in the early 60s, so does our discussion of Muhammad Ali's legacy require the context of the moment that surrounds him.

By the time Liston gets packaged for the screen and positioned against Ali in *The Greatest*, we find that his meaning as a fighter is shifted, illuminating the power of difference in the bruisers' binary arrangement. Played by actor Roger E. Mosley, Sonny Liston opposite Muhammad Ali is quietly different from the Sonny Liston opposite Floyd Patterson. While Patterson's compassion draws Liston's ruthlessness into relief, Ali's "beauty" and masculine grace paints Liston as the wounded and inferior brute desperate to reclaim the upper hand. Significantly, the projected masculine binary that defines the Liston-Patterson bout is no longer applicable when Ali is the other body in the arrangement. Liston remains a heel, an indiscriminate bruiser with no regard for the integrity of the sport, but our hero Ali who forces Liston into a defensive position decidedly outmatches him. Lemert contends that Ali appropriated men's fear of emasculation and "exposed the nether parts of the dominant male" by emphasizing his beauty in gleeful defiance of hetero-normative masculine tropes, and we see this aspect most actively at work in this relationship in *The Greatest* (83). In the lead-up to their 1962 fight, The Sonny Liston of the film retreats to a desperate position in order to assert his masculine superiority: "I never see you with any girls," he tells Ali, who has boisterously interrupted Liston's craps game to taunt him about his prospects in their upcoming bout, "so you must be a faggot" (*The Greatest*). Ali's public taunts speak to private

anxieties of masculine panic, much like the public spectacle of the prizefight reflects the private notions of the culture which surrounds it.

It is on these peculiar terms of public images and private anxieties that what Early calls "the conundrum of the prizefighter's presence" must be, in a sense, *solved* (33). This idea gets an extended treatment in the 1997 documentary by Leon Gast, *When We Were Kings*, which focuses on the 1974 heavyweight titleship bout between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire. The location of this fight is significant to its mythic capacity, and it represents a departure from the usual dynamic of predominantly white audiences projecting meaning onto black boxers. Still, Gast populates his film almost exclusively with acclaimed white sports writers like George Plimpton and Norman Mailer as a means to conjure the "meaning" of the event. In the case of Liston-Patterson, this meaning is deduced by absorbing the match into a recognizable American narrative of opportunity that speaks directly to its liberal moment; by the time Ali challenges Foreman for the title, though, the narrative becomes one about blackness and which fighter is its rightful champion. As per usual, the bruising is given a purpose from outside itself, and the reductive space of the ring renders its built meaning intelligible. African-born film and stage actor Malik Bowens remarks that Ali "gained the esteem of millions of Africans" through his refusal to fight in Vietnam. When he speaks about the champion, he strikes a much different chord:

> George Foreman? We didn't know who he was. We had heard that he was a world champion, and we were certain he was white. Then we realized he was black, like Muhammad Ali. But still, for us, Foreman represented America. He arrived with a dog, a German Shepherd, which immediately offended Africans since the Belgians had used Shepherds as police dogs (*When We Were Kings*).

On what other terms are this mute event and its silent bruisers made to speak? There exists

a complex network of moving parts comprising the prizefight's larger mechanism of meaning making. Some of Early's most cogent observations come when he widens his lens to examine the sport historically, demonstrating the manner in which boxing has "evolved," and rendering in scientific terms the history of bruising and its strange and prominent platform in the cultural milieu. "Boxing was meant to be humanitarian in the nineteenth century," Early writes, "because it replaced the duel, allowed men of all classes to respond to and defend themselves from masculine insult but prevented death (in most instances) because the contest involved no weapons" (53). Here, Early does more than bolster his connection between boxing and liberal idealism: his broader view of the sport as serving a social function regarding relations between men provides a deeply important context for understanding the legacy of the prizefight in terms that are specifically and dynamically *made*. As a culture's notions of what is and isn't permissible as sport changes, so does the sport of prizefighting become more or less "scientific" in order to meet those standards and remain viable as a space for codifying racial binaries:

> As capitalism became less raw and bloody, less laissez-faire, boxing became more and more self-conscious about masking its barbarism. In the oddest cultural paradox, just as when the black presence in basketball grew and the black player became the acrobatic, aerial wonder, the white player became the "the truck driver" and the "enforcer" because he could not match the black's grace, so in boxing the black became, for the most part, the master technician . . . and the white, with admittedly important exceptions, symbolized the purity of primitivism (10).

This passage illustrates the binary reduction of race relations as framed by masculine physical contest, and illustrates that the sport can then have no fixed meaning which exists independently of the cultural gaze and its imparted interpretations of what is humane, civilized and proper. Despite boxing's effort to civilize itself in accordance with social standards, the sport—which, at its core, is still a contest of strength and resilience—lends itself to bruisers wholly uninterested in

being civilized. When such figures emerge, boxing's narrative of evolution is challenged, thus rearranging the narratives of difference that create the truck drivers, enforcers, technicians and primitives of the square circle.

II. "The Baddest Man on the Planet": Mike Tyson's Illegal Masculinity

"*MADMAN!*" is splashed in bold italic type across the cover of the July 1997 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, over an image from the Tyson-Holyfield rematch in Las Vegas. Beneath that sensational interjection: "*a crazed Mike Tyson disgraces himself and his sport*" (Hoffer). This, of course, is in reference to the infamous Vegas bout, originally billed as an opportunity for Tyson to reclaim the heavyweight title after a decisive and surprising loss to Holyfield a year prior. This opportunity took a drastically different turn when Tyson—true to his perception as ruthless "destroyer"—removed his mouthpiece and bit through Holyfield's left ear in the middle of the third round (Woodward 64). This incident, containing "a savagery that went well beyond what even his promoter could market," made waves throughout the sport and beyond (Hoffer 37). The event was shocking enough to resonate in popular culture at a time when the sport's prominence in the cultural imaginary had begun to wane, and it quickly became fodder for late night talk show monologues and *Saturday Night Live* sketches. While such brutality stands on its own, independent of any gaze or constructing force, the ensuing media response draws into relief the action/reaction binary of the boxing canvas in relation to public opinion. Tyson was instantly cast as a maniac, a "disgrace" which made Holyfield, by default of the ring's reductive arrangement, a figure of "widespread sympathy" who represented the law and order of boxing's hard-fought public evolution (Griffin 83). Here Tyson is operating outside of the bounds of what is permissible not only in the ring, but as a black body on a public stage. In his embrace of illegality, Tyson assumes

the pose of raw masculine violence which eschews any "civilized" status to which the sport could lay claim, using his body as a force of unbridled corporeal destruction.

Tyson's "madman" status was, of course, not new terrain for the bruiser who had earned a reputation as a peerless terror who would stop at nothing in his bloody quest for total annihilation. It wasn't enough to threaten his opponents with bodily harm: he wanted to destroy their families, ruin their lives and flex over the carnage. This was not limited to the ring, as Tyson had been convicted despite his protestations of innocence in the rape of former Miss Black Rhode Island, Desiree Washington, whom Tyson continues to disparage with alarmingly violent language (Griffin 84). While his image has been broadly softened over the years, by a recurring character in his likeness on *The Simpsons* as well as a cameo appearance by the "madman" himself in the massively successful *Hangover* film franchise of the late 2000s, the 2012 documentary *Tyson* indicates that the boxer's reputation as a terrorizer is not quite completely past. His sexual violence against Washington, which he still vehemently denies, serves as a "profoundly devastating as a micro example of violence against one woman that carries injurious implications at the macro level with regard to how we understand men's violence against all women," indicating yet another level in the ongoing discussion between the bruisers' arrangement and the culture in which it is forged (Griffin 85).

It is useful here, as we examine the capacity of the public and reductive space of the boxing canvas to frame and amplify the broader culture of violence surrounding it, to call upon Early's analysis of the trope of the "war machine." The term is originally used by Norman Mailer in reference to Joe Frazier, but its status as a marker of boxing's "masculine nihilism" resonates here in confronting the problematic legacy of Mike Tyson (Early 86). Reading Tyson as war machine, in his gleeful disruption and devolution of boxing's historical push toward humaneness, I call upon

Early's parsing of the term itself. "It is the very irony of the metaphor 'war machine,'" he writes, "the strangeness of naming an athlete after an invention that his presence and profession are supposed either to supersede or predate, that is indicative of the complexity of our society's, of the modern industrial world's, response to boxing, to the primitive made flesh in its midst" (87). Beyond the aspect of the "primitive made flesh," which rings true in Tyson's presentation of himself as animalistic and his legacy of brutality and illegality both in and out of the ring, the term "war machine" is significant for our purposes because it signifies a built object. Tyson has constructed such an image through his words and actions, but this task of myth-making is lubricated significantly by the gaze of a white culture whose fear of black male sexuality extends as early in the history of mass visual culture as D.W. Griffith's infamous 1915 silent film *The Birth of a Nation.*

III. Conclusion: Can the Bruiser Speak?

When Gayatri Spivak posits her million-dollar question ("*Can the subaltern speak?*") in 1988, she is entering into a conversation with Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze about representation and the intellectual's relationship to power. Spivak implicates the intellectual in the creation of the Other, arguing that its body is the location of so much Western energy seeking always to re-name and re-create it: "It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other," she writes, "it is also that, in the constitution of that Other . . . great care [is] taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary" (75). While I have called upon the scholarship orbiting the sport directly, the spirit of Spivak's provocative question of representation and actualization is at the heart of my analysis. My conclusion is similarly

inconclusive, as I am convinced that the question of the bruiser's ability to "speak," to make his story intelligible independent of the constructing public gaze, is complex nearly to the point of unanswerability. While I have called upon Gerald Early's analysis of boxing culture to demonstrate the manner in which the prizefight's significance as political and racial microcosm occurs outside of itself, I would be remiss in not acknowledging that the bruiser—like the Hindu widow in Spivak's piece who commits suicide while menstruating, indicating that her motives were not related to pregnancy—speaks with his body. When Tyson refuses the boundaries of the sport's code of conduct, or Ali embodies his own iconoclasm on film, we are reminded that the prizefighters who, for better or worse, become cultural touchstones do so by virtue of their determination to modify, obliterate or dance with outside attempts at projecting meaning onto them. It is in this regard that Gerald Early's work has been so useful, as his intellectual history of the culture of prizefighting is at its core an intellectual history of performance and the ever-slippery notion of authenticity in relation to the narratives spun to re-name and re-create black male bodies.

As I wrote in the opening of this chapter, *The Culture of Bruising* is positioned at a significant moment in history, in which biology and sociology are thrust into conversation in order to examine the very sorts of issues at the heart of Early's collection: who are we, and to what extent are the divisions between us legitimate? This question was seemingly answered when Bill Clinton took the stage of the White House Press Room on June 26th, 2000, and introduced Drs. Francis Collins and Craig Venter, two biologists central to the maiden sequencing of the complete human genome. "The concept of race," Venter announced with certitude to the press corp, "has no genetic or scientific basis" ("President Clinton"). This information has been available for over a decade by the time Early speaks in 2011 at the panel on race at Washington University, but—despite science's deconstruction of the artificial categories of race, and despite America's election three

years prior of its first black president—the social components of racial division and animosity persist. Despite there being no genetic difference between a black body and a white one, the former is still too often perceived as criminal, dangerous, and different. The binary energy of the boxing ring, and its ability to reduce historical and misguided anxieties into a simplified narration of action and reaction, speaks to more than the public arena of sport. If we apply to the world this interrogation of made-ness and false binaries, we move ourselves deeper into the necessary questions of identity and its public representations which, despite science's unraveling of the divisions therein, continue to carve up an American society unable, or unwilling, to recognize their made status.

CHAPTER 4

"NOISE AND SHOW": BALDWIN'S GENIUS PERFORMANCE AND *A BAND CALLED DEATH*

In the spring of 2009, *New York Times* contributor Mike Rubin dropped a cultural bombshell with his piece, "This Band Was Punk Before Punk Was Punk." It told the improbable story of Death, an obscure and short-lived early 70s garage three piece whose frantic, no-frills approach to Rust Belt rock 'n' roll anticipated what would some half-decade later be dubbed "punk rock." While popular conceptions of the American punk movement are more commonly attached to the anthemic juvenilia of The Ramones or the cavalier art rock of The Velvet Underground (read: white guys from New York City), Rubin's article highlights the unsung contribution of Bobby, Dannis and David Hackney, three African American brothers from Detroit whose raw 1973 recordings "reveal a remarkable missing link between the high-energy hard rock of Detroit bands like The Stooges and MC5 from the late 1960s . . . and the high-velocity assault of punk from its breakthrough years of 1976 and '77" (Rubin). His article includes portions of an interview with Groovesville Records publishing director Brian Spears, who remarks that "trying to break a black group into rock 'n' roll was just tough during that time," but Rubin otherwise writes around the topic of race entirely.[4] While the impulse to introduce Death to the general public on the merits of their musical contribution alone is an understandable one, the significance of their already-compelling story is significantly heightened when considered as a natural extension of African American performance practice. I argue that Death's proto-punk aesthetic should be read as an extension of African American improvisational musical forms, rather than as a cultural anomaly.

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[4] Rubin does mention that Death "preceded Bad Brains, the most celebrated African-American punk band, by almost five years," and that the Hackney brothers cut their teeth in "Detroit's predominantly African-American east side," but stops short of examining the significance of their blackness in an otherwise largely white genre.

Such contextualizing offers a significant breakthrough in the way we understand the lineage of black expressive culture and the American punk scene of the late 70s as forms of musical dissidence. The 2013 documentary *A Band Called Death* shed more light on this obscured piece of "hardcore history," and provides an almost exhausting amount of color and texture to the family dynamic surrounding Death's formation and rapid dissolution (*A Band*). Much like Rubin's 2009 article, though, the film does not attempt to explore the corollary between black musical forms and this understudied stripe of American underground music. Death's blackness is evoked almost exclusively as a means to illustrate the band's improbability as arbiters of feedback-drenched "white boy music" within Detroit's black community (*A Band*). After grappling with Columbia Records executives over their controversial band name, Death officially disbanded in 1977, "the year punk staged its back-to-basics rock 'n' roll revival," and we miss a great opportunity to deepen our understanding of this period in American culture if we don't ask ourselves what the band's relationship to the genre might mean, and how it might be traced out of a blueprint of African American performance practice that had been in place well before that watershed year (Reynolds 31). Here I will push against the notion of punk rock as "the bastion of white listeners and performers," using James Baldwin's template of black genius performance as employed in novels like *Just Above My Head* as a means to better understand the state of masculine alternativity in the late 70s, as well as the dynamic capacity of black performance practice in reaching across a variety of musical traditions in its expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo (Ramírez-Sánchez 97).

Instead of treating the brief life of Death as an outlier in rock music history, or simply and sentimentally as "one of those great music stories," this chapter approaches their work as the articulation of an existing relationship between black expressive culture and the extreme performance practices of the American underground in the late 70s (*A Band*). *A Band Called Death*

commits the sin of too many rock documentaries by lionizing its subject without engaging it critically, a move I hope to rectify here. By not imagining Death's *meaning* as black punk performers, filmmakers Mark Covino and Jeff Howlett miss an opportunity to extend and deepen our understanding not only of punk culture, but also of African Americans' significant contribution to it. Instead of treating the Hackney brothers as existing in a cultural vacuum independent of the contributions of the radical black performers who came before them, this chapter will ask the significant questions missing in the film and Rubin's article: namely, why might three black brothers from Detroit find themselves at home in this "punk" milieu, and what might their silencing tell us about the parameters of black masculinity in the 1970s and beyond? Were Covino and Howlett to pursue this critical route, *A Band Called Death* would operate as more than a moving portrait of a troubled family of performers: it would open up the way we think about cultural exchange and the American underground in ways that have been previously unexplored. I will demonstrate the significance of this relationship with particular focus on "the improvisational sensibilities related to fluid performances of black masculinity," and how these performances both realize and push against those which emerged after the sexual revolution (Neal 21). To this end, I will return to the theoretical framework found in Mark Anthony Neal's *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*, along with criticism surrounding James Baldwin's 1979 novel *Just Above My Head* as critical and literary components of an extended examination of post-60s expressive culture, the American underground, and critical gender and performance theory.

Before continuing this line of inquiry, it is imperative to first lock down a working formal and philosophical definition of "punk," which is no easy task considering its resistance to traditional modes of categorization. Aesthetically, punk's most immediate significance lies in its rejection of the highly polished parameters of rock music culture and production of the early-to-

mid 70s. While intricate guitar solos, elaborate light shows and immaculate audio engineering marked the work of behemoths like Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, the punk movement sought to strip away what its practitioners saw as the artifice governing "psychedelia's expanded palette of timbres and stereophonic sorcery" (Reynolds 18). This was seen as both a restorative and destructive act, one of many paradoxical currents which were "fundamental to the punk situation" (Taylor 8).[5] Of course, the punk movement was about more than the music, and its peculiar brand of Socratic contrarianism is predicated upon a "simple stance of negation, of being *against*" (Reynolds 10). In this respect, I read "punk" as a distillation of bell hook's notion of "performance practice as a site of opposition," wherein what's being opposed is so far-reaching—at times amorphously general, and at others oddly specific—that it's no wonder the movement became a haven for all manners of the socially marginalized who felt "illegible" to the broader contours of society.[6] Considering punk in its oppositional capacity also makes it easier to understand its connection to African American expressive cultural practice, if for no other reason than its status as an underground space where traditional modes of aesthetic and political expression could be reorganized to form a counter-narrative of American culture. To this end, I again find great use in Baldwin, for whom "the black musician is . . . the restless experimenter who takes apart dominant musical forms and recasts them" (Shin). While "punk culture has . . . been recognized to have borrowed much from Black cultural groups, such as Rastafarians," there has yet to be a significant

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[5] The 1997 film *SLC Punk!* might be the piece of culture that most adequately addresses the contradictions found elsewhere in the movement. During a late scene in which the film's punk protagonist meets a skeptical love interest, she responds to his outlandish attire with the following observation: "You wanna be an individual, right? You look like you're wearing a uniform. You look like a punk. That's not rebellion. That's fashion." This idea gets the sociological treatment in Steven Taylor's *False Prophet: Field Notes from the Punk Underground* (2003), where he writes that "punk was an anticommodity movement that manifested through commodities" (8).

[6] "Just look at the back of the [Buzzcocks'] *Live at Roxy* album: there's three Rastafarians, two working behind the bar, one DJing, and there's black people in the audience. The girls probably outnumber the blokes, and the men are wearing make-up and half of them are gay" (Barber qtd. in Ensminger 51).

study which examines this cultural impact in terms of African Americans' foundational participation in forging the aesthetic conventions of the genre (Ramírez-Sánchez 94). Cultural critics have identified the punk's lifted elements of black culture—almost always identified in context of reggae, ska, dub and soundsystem culture—and some, like sociologist Ruben Ramírez-Sánchez, have done thoughtful and important work regarding the black punk experience; however, space remains for an analysis that approaches the movement not simply as one that borrows from or occasionally intersects with black performance practice, but as one that was born from it.

The American punk movement's brief but lacerating burst of creativity, twinned with its philosophical foundation of eschewing traditional rules and boundaries governing popular music production, shares much of its visceral impact and aesthetic strategy with earlier African American artistic forms. Simon Reynolds's seminal 2006 book *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk, 1978-1984*, sharply observes that the rejection of the parameters of classic rock 'n' roll by the first-wave punk artists of the U.K. "had mostly purged 'blackness' from rock, severing the music's links to R&B while simultaneously rejecting disco as escapist and vapid" (3).[7] This is a smart observation, and it situates his argument that post-punk and "no wave" were more culturally inclusive and forward thinking than their first-wave forebears, but it doesn't reflect the cultural nuances found in British punk's grittier and more complicated American cousin. When we understand Death's contribution in terms of Baldwin's "restless" rendition of genius performance, it becomes clear that the primary difference between the early moments of English and American punk was the contribution of African Americans, even if those contributions have been either silenced or

[7] Reynolds identifies "the mountainous abuse heaped on Chuck Berry" as the most available evidence of this purging. He points to the scripted introduction to the Sex Pistols' early demo tape *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, wherein frontman Johnny Rotten interrupts the band's half-hearted rendition of "Johnny B. Goode": "Oh fuck, it's *awful*. Stop it. I fucking hate it. *Aaarrrgh*" (3).

reduced by history to the realm of scholarly ephemera. The stripped-bare, primal screams of punk and hardcore practitioners had more in common with the honesty, ferocity and skeletal rawness of delta blues performers like Robert Johnson, or the early rock and roll of Bo Diddley[8]—not to mention the free jazz freakouts of Ornette Coleman[9], or the aggressive psychedelia of Funkadelic—than it did with white cultural practitioners like The Beatles or Rolling Stones. I read punk culture as a "big tent" space for those who found themselves on the fringes of society, and as one hospitable to cultural exchange and built upon the improvisational possibilities of African American cultural contributions like jazz and the blues. Just as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison saw "jazz as a mode and a model for expressing the experiences of performing among multiple aesthetic impulses, multiple emotional states, and multiple psychological selves simultaneously," the silenced African American roots of punk music illustrate a lengthening of this practice into the seemingly disparate corners of subcultural production in the late 70s and early 80s, where multiplicity and contradiction reign supreme (Muyumba 21).

Punk, along with its orbiting subgenres and mutations, was about smashing old forms of musical expression and howling into the void. Its musicians and enthusiasts were marginalized youth, economic outliers, and people who found themselves at odds with mainstream white culture. On another level, the scene served as a socially progressive space where raucous expressions of alternative masculinity could "counter the violence performed by gender norms" put in place by traditional pillars of American culture such as Hollywood and major music labels

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[8] Rubin's article mentions that Death guitarist David Hackney fashioned his style "from studying Pete Townshend's power-chord wrist technique," but we should remember that it was Bo Diddley and John Lee Hooker whom Townshend was trying to "out-strum" (Langley).

[9] This connection is referenced most explicitly in Refused's watershed post-hardcore LP *The Shape of Punk to Come* (1999).

(Butler xxv). In fact, as Tavia N'yongo has pointed out, "punk may literally be impossible to imagine without gender and sexual dissidence," a dissidence which comes vividly to life in the work and criticism of James Baldwin (107). His self-perceived status as "outsider and interloper"[10] makes him the perfect literary conduit for exploring the interplay between punk and African American cultures (Zaborowska 2). His history of antagonizing the restrictive social and sexual boundaries placed on black men at mid-century has drawn much attention in the realms of gender and sexuality, and, as I examined in Chapter Two, scholars like Koritha Mitchell are currently reevaluating his contribution to performance studies with a focus on the political possibilities of performance practice in improving the lives of African Americans. While I find counter examples in Baldwin's short fiction, I am interested in here in the "critical and creative" capacity of the stage (Mitchell 33). Reading punk culture through the radical side of Baldwin's theorization of performance will help me to illustrate the commonalities between black male performance and the punk scene of the late 70s.

While the term "punk" probably meant nothing to Baldwin outside of its pejorative context, *Just Above My Head* and its story of tragic queer soul performer Arthur Montana can be read as transplanting the punk ethos from gritty underground clubs of Manhattan to the storefront churches of Harlem. It relays the meteoric rise and fall of Arthur Montana, "The Emperor of Soul," a gay soul singer who finds fame despite the "hyper masculinity . . . that the tradition demanded" (Neal 143). As a result, Arthur's identity as a gay black soul man in the post-Civil Rights Era is predicated upon his ability, like Baldwin, to perform socially and musically outside of the reductive cylinders put in place by white hetero culture. Arthur performs from his outsider position "as though music could really accomplish the miracle of making the walls come tumbling down,"

[10] Zaborowska adds that Baldwin was "out of place even in bohemian Greenwich village," where "young men and women flocked to express their socially unacceptable lifestyles" (4).

(Baldwin 219) just as the punk movement mobilized its performance practice "as a force to change, if not the world, then the consciousness of individual listeners" (Reynolds 6). And just as Arthur's "social protest assumes the form of an unfettered expression of his sexuality," so does the American punk movement privilege the articulation of sexual otherness as a radical form of cultural disruption (Shin 241). What Baldwin is describing in *Just Above My Head* gives us a model by which to understand how these sorts of practices were built into African American expressive culture and merge with traditions like jazz, soul and the blues. Viewing the performance sphere of punk culture in light of this tradition, it becomes harder to see it as a white cultural phenomenon. Not only should we plug Death into the gap as punk's "missing link," but we should also be mindful of their participation in the broader black musical tradition as well as the cultural diffusion occurring in this catch-all underground performance space of punk culture.

Baldwin boldly says in a 1961 interview that "artists are here to disturb the peace," and few musical movements took this sentiment to heart as readily as punk (Terkel 21). Indeed, even Baldwin's aesthetic approach in *Just Above My Head* could be described as curiously "punk" in its treatment of homosexual encounters. He gives us a tragic story of ill-fated genius as a means to renegotiate ethnic and sexual identity in the cultural fallout after the Civil Rights Movement which, significantly, "hinged on definitions of American masculinity and African American identity" (Muyumba 90). Baldwin navigates these definitions by employing some of the same (de)constructive techniques I have identified in American punk, nodding toward a particular African American artistic tradition of adopting "dissenting methods of narration and aesthetic articulation" (Brooks 6). While the novel is highly lyrical—perhaps, as many have argued, to a fault—when Baldwin turns his attention to sexual contact between men, this lyricism often gives way to direct, clinical language stripped clean of its elevated, rhapsodic quality. Describing such

contact between Arthur and his bandmate Crunch, the pages of poetic tension break off into frank, declarative observations as their bodies come in contact: “Well. It was Crunch’s cock, and so he sucked it” (211). These moments often puncture the narrator’s voice throughout the novel and in many ways embody the punk aesthetic simultaneously on the rise elsewhere in American culture while typifying the degree to which Baldwin “represents a shift in consciousness away from the limitations of color and race towards possibilities based on the acceptance of the body and sexuality” (Kornegay 328).

Of course, critics of the late 70s—a time when Baldwin’s “frustration with American audiences” was being met with waning critical enthusiasm—took issue with his focus here (Zaborowska 144). John Romano’s review of *Just Above My Head*, for example, embodies a broader dissatisfaction with Baldwin’s fiction, as *The New York Times* writer takes him to task for privileging personal experience instead of producing a “novel whose social-historical context is convincing and secure.” The Baldwin of *The Fire Next Time*, Romano argues, focuses more lucidly on “the street,” on the various social forces such as the police department which can act against communities of color. As a novel that “takes place almost entirely between the sheets,” *Just Above My Head* represents for Romano a sort of culmination of Baldwin’s weaknesses as a fiction writer allegedly unable to grapple with social reality in any meaningful way. While this sort of reading is common among Baldwin’s critics at the time, like “masculine icon” (Neal 144) Eldridge Cleaver who, like other young African American writers in the early 60s, regarded Baldwin’s novels as “too patently a working-out of inner conflict at the price of distorting the realities of race and racial conflict in America,” it is unable to account for the nuance and shade which characterizes Baldwin’s work as a social observer (Romano). But if we approach Baldwin’s work here on the terms I’ve described, we see that *Just Above My Head* is a work whose significance has less to do

with the tangible features of its political moment and more to do with the ability of private lives to illustrate a political framework. This is a sophisticated form of cultural critique analogous less to a daily weather report and closer to long-range climate science. Baldwin sees great potential in the private experience to illustrate public problems, and his prodigious gift as a fiction writer lies in his unmatched ability to make the personal, political. Just as the peculiar performance anxiety of the narrator of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" reveals the social limits of expressive culture in the Jim Crow era, so does the tragic arc of Arthur "The Emperor of Soul" Montana illustrate valuable cultural information about queer black masculinity in America.

While I am interested in the limits of the stage as a space for recasting cultural narratives, I also recognize its radical potential for disrupting those narratives. And perhaps no musical form was more disruptive in this sense than the American punk scene, which inhibits "the possibility of creating a culture . . . outside the mainstream, which [is] innovative, yet critical of existing social and cultural standards" (Bronski qtd. in Ensminger 65). Baldwin announces through his engagement with the stage in *Just Above My Head* a notion of black performers that orbits around the acquisition of power and defeat of problematic racial narratives through this outsiderness. Performance is the joint connecting the personal to the political, as an act which submits individual expression to a mass audience. And just as punk was beginning to become a cultural force in America at the time of its writing, *Just Above My Head* entertains the political possibilities of individuals performing outside of reductive cultural cylinders. In many ways it is the sort of performance Baldwin gave for his entire career, and we regard this novel and his work writ large with a tragic narrowness if we ignore the implications that Baldwin's sheets might have on the streets.

In the United States, five years after what would become Death's . . . *For the Whole World to See*[11] was relegated to the margins of music history, some of punk's largest-looming figures were spurring a complex conversation about cultural appropriation and the political possibilities of underground performance practice. Lou Reed's challenging 1978 *Street Hassle* LP contains the glibly problematic, "'I Wanna Be Black,' a proto-rap unspooling of racist stereotypes that makes fun of white hipsters by forcing a deep wallow in ignorance" (Powers). That song's jarring and maximalist approach still has the ability to shock listeners by its packaging of abominably racist attitudes and incendiary—if firmly tongue-in-cheek—irreverence with a cast of black female background singers. Beneath its surface, "I Wanna Be Black" espouses a decidedly punk attitude toward self identity and implicates a stripe of young white men in the thoughtless appropriation of a sexually fantasized black male culture:

I wanna be black
Have natural rhythm
Shoot twenty feet of jism, too
And fuck up Jews
I wanna be black
I wanna be a Panther

Echos of Norman Mailer's "The White Negro" abound here, as Reed's viciously clueless narrator participates in the sort of misguided cultural vacuuming of which Mailer accused "psychopathic" pre-war hipsters in his highly controversial 1957 essay. While Mailer "constructs the black musician as stud, making his artistic authority a function of his sexual potency a rhetorical move that epitomizes unconscious liberal racism," Reed riffs on those unconscious stereotypes in a move that brings such racism to its surface and demonstrates the degree to which this cultural exchange was prevalent in the punk community during the late 70s (Shin 17). Like Mailer's essay, Reed's

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[11] Death's early '74 sessions were finally collected and released as an LP under this title by Drag City Records in 2009.

speaker "tells us more about the repressed fantasies of white men than . . . about what it means to be black" (Taylor 70). Significantly, our "wannabe" speaker's fantasies about black manhood are built exclusively and problematically upon an imposition of what Stanley Crouch, in his freewheeling review of *Just Above My Head*, calls the "joint role of stud and sexual butler" (37). Reed's focus on racialized sexual fantasy is significant, and can be unpacked with the help of Baldwin and Crouch, especially as Reed makes the target of his satirical skewering more explicit:

I don't wanna be a fucked up,
Middle-class college student anymore.
I just wanna have a stable of foxy little whores
Yeah, yeah I wanna be black.

The white gaze of Reed's speaker reduces black men to primitive and sexualized others, and it returns us to that familiar intersection between public and private experience which so deeply troubled and informed Baldwin's career as a writer and public intellectual. It's precisely the sort of crude myth making from which Baldwin, like his narrator in "This Morning," sought refuge in Paris, where "people were too busy with their own lives, their private lives, to make fantasies about [his], to set up walls around [his]" (175). Reed's "walling off" of black male experience by "a fucked up, middle-class college student"—overblown and deliberately provocative as it may be—can go a long way toward helping us navigate this intersection, and it both typifies and complicates modern ideas about "hegemonic masculinity" and "hegemonic whiteness," which relay "explicit and implicit cultural messages about *who* authentic white men are, and expectations for *how* they should behave" (Hughey 98). Furthermore, just as the "deviant and aggressive" lyrics and stage presence of punk icon Patti Smith "rejected both mainstream and countercultural stereotypes of femininity," so did male punk performers reconfigure hetero-normative models of masculine

behavior on stage (N'yongo 105).[12] As such, contextualizing Reed's song within the black roots of punk music goes a long way toward sharpening our understanding of the barbed and complex history of black cultural appropriation at the hands of white artists as it resonated in the punk clubs of the American underground.

Considering the American punk movement and its roots in African American culture, we might now read the movement as an attempt to restore the "vanguard potential" of black bohemianism which Shin and Judson claim was "robbed" by "white liberals' celebration of jazz as a form of oppositional cultural power" (Shin). Their article "Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin's Primer of Black Masculinity" examines this in tandem with Baldwin's "silenced" voice as a joint connecting the black and feminist consciousness movements of the post-Civil Rights Era. They emphasize the performers in Baldwin's fiction as a prototype of the queer critical discourse that would later be "legitimated" by theorists like Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick and Lee Edelman, arguing that his work "synthesizes race and gay consciousness during some of the most politically volatile decades of the twentieth century" (Shin 247). This sort of observation has since become a sort of baseline reading of Baldwin's oeuvre, and it can't help but feel like a retread in 2014. Still, I find great use in Shin and Judson's reading of *Just Above My Head*, as I repurpose it at this intersection between blackness and punk culture. Shin and Judson interrogate the degree to which that epic and elegiac novel "generates an alternative vernacular of black American masculinity" through its depiction of Arthur Montana, and by considering it within the seemingly disparate performance sphere of the American punk movement emerging parallel to the writing of

[12] Iggy Pop exuded sexual ambiguity in his elastic, bloody performances with The Stooges, just as Joey Ramone celebrated asexual juvenilia with primitive, anthemic songs about cheeseburgers and sniffing glue. These alternative masculinities contributed to a "type of social organization [wherein] both women and men are able to engage in *gender maneuvering*—strategies members use to transform the rock culture into one that is not sexist, or at least less sexist than other social arenas" (Ramirez, Michael 110).

Baldwin's novel, we see that it's was much more of its moment than the critics of the time considered it to be. The two are in dialogue as expressions of dissatisfaction with the status quo of American political and expressive culture as avenues for affecting social change. Shin and Judson's reading of *Just Above My Head* provides a critical jumping-off point in their focus on Baldwin's scrambling of traditional musical forms, as I argue for a reevaluation of the lineage of American underground culture leading up to the first term of the Reagan administration.

As a genre and lifestyle, punk music was about frightening and antagonizing its audience, which speaks to the privileged position of white men in fashioning their own models of masculine behavior. Black men couldn't deliver this genre to white audiences in the 1970s, because those audiences were frightened enough by the music when packaged by white performers. We see this in *A Band Called Death* through the film's insistence that the name, Death—and the group's refusal to change it—was almost exclusively responsible for their demise. Their insistence on retaining it reflects the importance of naming as a means to retaining one's selfhood and subjectivity: "If you give them the title to our band," guitarist David Hackney tells his brothers and bandmates, "then you might as well give them everything else" (*A Band*). Could a band like The Sex Pistols, The Circle Jerks or The Dead Boys have found purchase with white American audiences if its members were all black? It would be hard to make a case in the affirmative, and Mark Anthony Neal's contention that the "'legible' black male body is often thought to be a criminal body and/or a body in need of policing and containment" can help us understand the seemingly insurmountable odds that were stacked against a band like Death whose name signified a defiant uncontainability to white audiences (5). Interestingly, though, the name "Death" was not for the Hackney brothers the aggressive gesture others interpreted it to be. Rather, the name arose from David Hackney's spirituality and his desire to "put a positive spin on death," as his brother

Dannis remarks: “[Death is] kind of like birth. It’s not a good or a bad thing. It’s just a thing” (*A Band*). In Neal’s terms, the Hackney brothers’ masculinities were “illegible,” both to white audiences not ready for an all-black male band called Death, and to many members of “the black community . . . [who] were tuning in to groups like Earth, Wind and Fire” (*A Band*). Death’s meaning as a ferocious rock group composed of three black men could only be made legible in terms of violence and danger to which black masculinities have been historically relegated by mainstream white culture. Whereas the early days of hip hop were resigned to black, urban youth, the stakes of the participation of African Americans in a genre like punk that had so instantly captured the imaginations of young white people posed a greater threat to those who see black men as threatening and criminal. While punk’s “big tent” would likely have been hospitable to Death a half-decade later, the band’s ahead-of-the-curve genius performance found them at a musical moment that simply wasn’t ready for the “alternative vernacular” of this particular extension of black performance practice.

CHAPTER 5

AFTERWORD: "RIP IT UP AND START AGAIN"

Perhaps no event in recent memory illustrates the dramatic stakes of black masculine social performance as vividly as the killing of Trayvon Martin on February 6th, 2012. As the details of that horrific event came to light during litigation, it became clear that what was really on trial was black masculinity and the framework of self agency established by our own Bill of Rights. That tragic story spun out to reveal the associations between black men and violence that still persist in dark corners of the American cultural imagination, with "neighborhood watch" member George Zimmerman interpreting the 17-year-old Martin as a black body "in need of surveillance and control" (Neal 122). It didn't matter that the unarmed minor wasn't committing any crime when Zimmerman approached him that night. Martin's black manhood was the threat, and Zimmerman's acquittal in the summer of 2013 served as a shameful reminder of the staying power of problematic racial narratives in justifying control of and violence against those bodies.

I recognize that my arguments about James Baldwin, boxers and punk rockers may seem inconsequential when compared to the senseless murder of an unarmed teenager and the broader tide of violence it represents. Still, the purpose of my study has been to illumine the troubling cultural arrangement whose tumultuous history finds expression in such deplorable acts. Each "stage" I have touched upon here reminds us is that the power of audience often determines the meaning of the performance, whether it takes place on an ocean liner full of white Americans or in the punk clubs of the American underground. And when that audience wields the sort of power that white men have historically wielded in America, the results can often have very real and disturbing repercussions. As the circumstances surrounding Martin's killing reminds us, "the expectations and possibilities of being a black man are conflated into a limited series of

performative displays," and it is my hope that this study will broaden our understanding of the way this performative social arrangement registers in a variety of cultural contexts (Alexander 74). Performance is so intertwined with the popular myth of racial difference that it behooves us as scholars of critical race and cultural theory to pay careful attentions to its manifestations, wherever they may occur, so that we might hope to one day move beyond them.

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