ESSAY

"Esther Weren't No Harlot": Rape and Marriage in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

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Abstract

To consider how James Baldwin resisted racialized notions of sexuality in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, I employ a number of black feminist critics—including Saidiya Hartman, Patricia Williams, Hortense Spillers, and Patricia Hill Collins—to analyze three under-studied minor characters: Deborah, Esther, and Richard. Those three characters are best understood as figures of heterosexual nonconformity who articulate sophisticated and important critiques of rape and marriage in America at the turn of the twentieth century. Baldwin thus wrote subversive theories of race and sexuality into the margins of the novel, making its style inextricable from its politics. Baldwin's use of marginal voices was a deft and intentional artistic choice that was emancipatory for his characters and that remains enduringly relevant to American sexual politics. In this particularly polarizing transition from the Obama era to the Donald J. Trump presidency, I revisit Baldwin's ability to subtly translate political ideas across fault lines like race, nationality, and sex.

Keywords: James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, sexual politics, polarization, Barack Obama, Donald Trump

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you.

James Baldwin, 1965.¹

Slavery will last a thousand years, the slaveholder said and believed.

James Baldwin, 1973.²

On his final Friday in the Oval Office, President Barack Obama wanted to talk about books. In an interview with Michiko Kakutani, the chief book critic for

The New York Times, Obama described writing as a tool of self-discovery and reading fiction as an exercise in empathy. Again and again, he linked the literary with the political: "When so much of our politics is trying to manage this clash of cultures brought about by globalization and technology and migration, the role of stories to unify—as opposed to divide, to engage rather than marginalize—is more important than ever."³ Amidst a turbulent transition of power, and with a number of sweeping, polarizing global trends on his mind, Obama asked us—with deceptive simplicity—to read, to write, to "find what's sacred in other people's stories."⁴

I turn to James Baldwin as a way to consider the mechanics of Obama's call to action. After all, Baldwin was often acutely aware that he was communicating across disparate worlds. "I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah," he mused aloud to a sea of white faces in a debate at the Cambridge Union in 1965.⁵ "It would seem to me that the question before the house is a proposition horribly loaded, that one's response to that question depends on where you find yourself in the world, what your sense of reality is."⁶ Much of Baldwin's career was spent managing clashing systems of reality, whether racial, sexual, or economic. As Dwight McBride has written, Baldwin was a writer who "constantly tailored [his identities] to fit the circumstances in which he was compelled to articulate himself."⁷ Though he acknowledged the gulf between his listeners and himself, Baldwin nevertheless insisted that dialogue was possible, "at least on certain levels," and that such polite conversations might even have "some effect on the world."⁸

This essay explores Baldwin's first effort to treat race and sexuality honestly in a novel without alienating white readers or the conservative, white publishing establishment.⁹ In a letter to literary critic T. E. Cassidy after *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was published in 1953, Baldwin described the novel as "a fairly deliberate attempt to break out of what I always think of as the 'cage' of Negro writing."¹⁰ In this reading, the various stylistic features of *Go Tell It* represent Baldwin's attempts to articulate himself despite woefully inadequate taxonomies of race and sex in 1950s America.¹¹

Using modern feminist techniques that were unavailable to contemporaneous reviewers, I explore three sophisticated critiques of American sexual norms that passed largely unnoticed in the positive critical response to *Go Tell It*. I focus on Part Two of the novel, "The Prayers of the Saints," and foreground three minor characters—Deborah, Esther, and Richard—who are victimized by, but resistant to, the dominant discourses on race and sex in America. Deborah, Esther, and Richard have been excluded, to some extent, by the very structure of the novel—*Go Tell It* was written in a third-person limited perspective, and the story is never told from a minor character's point of view.

Part Two is particularly useful because in the critical attention to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, it was this second section that earned the most praise. Paul Pickrel, for instance, included *Go Tell It* in *The Yale Review*'s "Outstanding Novels" issue for Baldwin's use of flashback techniques in "Prayers."¹² But Pickrel, like most

other contemporaneous critics, focused almost exclusively on structure and style; few reviewers, whether contemporaneous or modern, have thought critically about the minor characters in "The Prayers of the Saints."¹³ I apply modern critical interpretations to this well-received but under-studied section of the novel to revisit some of the richness of these complex characters.

Moreover, the minor characters in Part Two are both chronologically and theoretically important. Though *Go Tell It* is set "on a Saturday in March, in 1935," these characters are introduced in a series of flashbacks that span a thirty-some year period from 1887 to 1922.¹⁴ As such, Deborah, Esther, and Richard bridge a generational gap between Gabriel and Florence's mother—who "had been born, innumerable years ago, during slavery" (p. 65)—and Gabriel's adopted son John Grimes, the protagonist, as he turns 14 in the spring of 1935. The contrast between Parts One and Three of *Go Tell It*, which take place over a single day, and the wider timespan of "Prayers" suggests that John struggles as much with the past as with the present. Moreover, Baldwin's attention to Deborah, Esther, and Richard confirms that while homoeroticism heavily influenced Baldwin's thought, his understanding of sexuality is not reducible to it.

I understand Deborah, Esther, and Richard as three figures of perversity and deviance that illustrate how sexuality has been deployed as a tool of white supremacy, even for heterosexual black people. I draw from a number of black feminist scholars who have analyzed the discourses of rape and marriage that Baldwin explores in *Go Tell It*. I argue that Deborah, Esther, and Richard are structurally marginal but theoretically instrumental. Taken together, these three characters offer substantive critiques of rape and marriage in America from the postbellum period to the middle of the twentieth century. They experience and articulate complex repudiations of the idea that white exploitation of black sexuality had ended with the emancipation of slaves. Baldwin told Studs Terkel in 1961, for instance, that black women "have been paying [a price] for 300 years; and for 100 of those years when they were legally and technically free."¹⁵ Thus the marginal characters in *Go Tell It* can illustrate how slavery shaped Baldwin's sexual imaginary, with multigenerational reverberations that lasted well into the twentieth century.

By describing Esther, Deborah, and Richard as figures of perversity, I mean that they exhibit identities, desires, and practices that exceed and undermine the available sexual taxonomies of Baldwin's era. Roderick Ferguson has usefully outlined the many ways in which black familial forms have been seen as perversions of the American heterosexual ideal. He lists a wide taxonomy of black non-heteronormativity: "common law marriages, out-of-wedlock births, lodgers, single-headed families, nonmonogamous sexual relationships, unmarried persons, and homosexual persons and relationships."¹⁶ Ferguson explains that Baldwin's understanding of sexuality—while obviously informed by homosexuality—also draws from "a diasporic community" of multiple and intersecting "displacements, exclusions, and contradictions."¹⁷ In modern literary studies, these characters are perhaps best understood as "queer," though Baldwin himself never employed that term.¹⁸

The section's first chapter, "Florence's Prayer," opens with a flashback to the American South in 1887. The scene is dominated by fear: Deborah, who is Florence and Gabriel's 16-year-old neighbor, "had been taken away into the fields ... by many white men who did things to her that made her cry and bleed" (p. 64). Her father, who had gone to a white man's house to retaliate, "said that he would kill him [the white man] and all the other white men he could find" (p. 64). But the white men "had beaten him and left him for dead" and now threatened to set houses in the black part of town ablaze. So along with the rest of the town's black community, Florence, Gabriel, and their mother sit nervously inside their home, praying and waiting for the white men to leave.

Since the story is never told from Deborah's perspective, Baldwin spends little time on the emotional or psychological effects of rape. Rather, he seems to understand rape as a tool of oppression. He inscribes an act of violence against an individual within a larger system of social control: race riots, which had happened in town before. The irony of a black community fearing punishment for white men's crimes is obvious. In this scheme, black women are equally and often interchangeably subject to violence. Florence's mother is acutely afraid because she knows that Florence, though just 13 years old, might also be raped during a race riot. Florence's mother asks God to "take special care of this girl here," a request that Baldwin emphasizes is "the first prayer Florence heard, the only prayer she was ever to hear in which her mother demanded the protection of God more passionately for her daughter than she demanded it for her son" (p. 64). While the entire black community was in danger that night, the most dire threat was to girls like Florence.

In other words, Baldwin placed Deborah at the margins of the novel but at the center of enduring, deleterious discourses of sexuality in America. He understood that sexual objectification was a tool of slavery. He once told Nikki Giovanni that laws defining slave status through the mother "are really mercantile standards. They're based on cotton; they're based on oil; they're based on peanuts; they're based on profits."¹⁹ He argued before the Cambridge Union that the American economy was "created by my labor and my sweat and the violation of my women."²⁰ In this first flashback of "Florence's Prayer," Deborah is violently and publicly violated by these ideas. Florence feels exploited, too. In 1900, while working as a cook and serving-girl for a white family in town, Florence decides to go north "on the day her master proposed that she become his concubine" (p. 71). Baldwin's emphasis on the word "master" is clear: for both Deborah and Florence, the links between economic exploitation and sexual violation are overt, even though chattel slavery had ended before either woman was born.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman writes at length about how and why racial exploitation did not end with emancipation. From Hartman's point of view, "emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection."²¹ Though Hartman intentionally avoids scenes of terror and violence like rape, she is nonetheless interested in

"the limits of emancipation, the ambiguous legacy of universalism, the exclusions constitutive of liberalism, and the blameworthiness of the freed individual."²² Baldwin used the various flashbacks in "Prayers" to illustrate such ambiguities; on an affective level alone, Florence and her mother's terror underscores the limits and shortcomings of their liberty.

As a method of oppression, the rape of enslaved women was predicated upon a total disregard for the idea of consent. Legal theorist Patricia Williams describes "black anti-will" as a belief structure in which black women embody a total lack of control, agency or free will.²³ Like Hartman, Williams argues explicitly that the idea of black anti-will did not disappear with emancipation.²⁴ For white men to rape Deborah was not a punishable offense—formal legal recourse would have been unthinkable, and neither Deborah nor her father even attempt it. Even her father's meager threats of violence were not only prohibited, but were violently punished and nearly brought to bear on the entire black community. Baldwin's imagined postbellum world—Deborah is raped in 1887—is marked by jarring similarities to Hartman's antebellum one, where a slave "was recognized as a reasoning subject who possessed intent and rationality solely in the context of criminal liability."²⁵ Even after emancipation, a black person's free will remained heavily regulated and criminalized.

In Hartman's terms, the female slave embodies "female gender as the locus of unredressed and negligible injury."²⁶ Here, sexual violence becomes normative, in the sense that perpetrators do not—and cannot—face consequences. Hartman studies slave case law and concludes that "the (re)production of enslavement and the legal codification of racial subordination depended upon various methods of sexual control and domination."²⁷ In this sense, Deborah is seen as "the living proof and witness of [her community's] daily shame" not because her rape was an aberration, but precisely because her victimization was a deliberate reproduction of enslavement and racial exploitation.²⁸ The impact is profound: when sexual violence is systematically unpunished, the very notion of sexuality is thrown into disarray. In what she calls "the discourse of seduction in slave law," Hartman describes the "confusion between consent and coercion, feeling and submission, intimacy and domination, and violence and reciprocity."²⁹ The rape of black women by white men has corrosive effects on sexual intercourse generally, including between black men and black women.

For Deborah, rape activates a set of stigmas and myths that subsume and corrupt her sexuality in the eyes of others. Even after Deborah has physically recovered, the black men (and women) in her community continue to perpetuate her victimization. As Baldwin describes:

In those days Florence and Deborah, who had become close friends after Deborah's "accident," hated all men. When men looked at Deborah they saw no further than her unlovely and violated body. In their eyes lived a perpetually lewd, uneasy wonder concerning the night she had been taken in the fields. That night had robbed her of the right to be considered a woman. No man would approach her in honor because

she was a living reproach, to herself and to all black women and to all black men. If she had been beautiful, and if God had not given her a spirit so demure, she might, with ironic gusto, have acted out that rape in the fields forever. Since she could not be considered a woman, she could only be looked on as a harlot, a source of delights more bestial and mysteries more shaking than any proper woman could provide. Lust stirred in the eyes of men when they looked at Deborah, lust that could not be endured because it was so impersonal, limiting communion to the area of her shame. (p. 69)

As Hartman suggests, the town's understanding of Deborah's victimhood is paradoxical. Baldwin's chosen euphemism—"accident"—obviously obfuscates the rapists' criminality. But it also connotes some carelessness on Deborah's part, implying, perhaps, that she was not *really* unwilling. For years after the attack, Deborah's presumed consent to sexual intercourse is taken for granted. As Gabriel later describes, Deborah becomes surrounded by "her legend, her history" which is enough "to put her forever beyond the gates of any honorable man's desire" (p. 93). Men eroticize her rape—if she were prettier, she might have "acted out that rape in the fields forever" with "ironic gusto" (p. 93). They assume that Deborah will perform sex acts that an honorable woman would not. Deborah knows that the men in her town have accepted these eroticized meanings of rape—she can see it in their eyes—and thus knows that sexual intercourse would conflate submission with consent and largely reinscribe her rape. Her body gives physicality to the desires of others.

As a victim of rape, Deborah is no longer considered gender conforming and, for many in her community, has no claim to womanhood. Patricia Williams would call this interpretation of rape totalizing, in that Gabriel, for instance, considers chastity to be the whole requirement of womanhood.³⁰ Deborah is invested with a rhetorical weight that is entirely separate from her physical body—in this reading, she is a harlot, a walking symbol of shame. The fact that she has been reduced to an object of pleasure in the eyes of men is made plain by their impersonal, dehumanizing gaze. Thus rape is a means by which white men can use Deborah's sexuality and control her gender simultaneously.

Both Hartman and Williams emphasize the links between totalized sexuality and economic exploitation. As Hartman puts it: "At issue here is the construction of 'woman' not as a foundational category with given characteristics, attributes, or circumstances but within a particular racial economy of property that intensified its control over the object of property through the deployment of sexuality."³¹ With the ideal black woman conceptualized as a productive object of property, her sexuality becomes something to be used, both to reinscribe her objectification and to produce more property. Hartman sums up: "The captive female does not possess gender so much as she is possessed by gender—that is, by way of a particular investment in and use of the body."³² As two young women enveloped by racialized and gendered narratives that they know to be exploitative, Deborah and Florence are quite right to hate all men in town.

Moreover, using texts about black labor that were contemporaneous with Baldwin's early career, Roderick Ferguson has helpfully reminded us why Baldwin had good reason to doubt that exploitative, racialized fantasies had disappeared upon emancipation. In 1935, Carnegie Corporation board trustee Newton Baker—who would later commission Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*—wrote a letter praising "white people in this country who received slaves from slave ships and undertook to make useful laborers of them."³³ Baker situates black people within an economy based on the productive needs of chattel slavery. When Myrdal published *An American Dilemma* in 1944, he glorified rationality and economic production as "the essentials of the American ethos."³⁴ For Myrdal, since black people were irrational and dysfunctional, they struggled to integrate into American society. Both men are elucidating a racist fantasy that, as Patricia Williams reminds us, perpetuates "a vision of blacks as simple-minded, strong-bodied, economic actants."³⁵

In this reading, it seems improbable that Baldwin genuinely believed that Deborah had an "accident." Rather, he knows she is trapped in a system of property and ownership with roots in trans-Atlantic slavery. Baldwin sees Deborah as "robbed" of her womanhood, exploited for her use value.³⁶ Though Deborah is not literally property in the eyes of the law, she is a victim of lingering constructions that define black women's value instrumentally. Broadly, then, Baldwin seems to doubt that emancipation seriously disrupted the structures of power that inextricably link racial formation and sexual objectification. Deborah's intimate, interior life is largely governed by the social and political exigencies of postbellum America.

In the next chapter, "Gabriel's Prayer," Deborah's marriage to Gabriel only perpetuates masculinist claims to the ownership and use of her body. The decision to marry her at all strikes Gabriel as a radical, charitable restoration of her status as a woman. It is a provocative union: "She, who had been living proof and witness of their daily shame, and who had become their holy fool—and he, who had been the untamable despoiler of their daughters, and thief of their women, their walking prince of darkness!" (p. 104). Again, the language is totalizing and exploitative, in that sexual intercourse with Gabriel means a woman has been spoiled or stolen. After marriage, Gabriel sees Deborah as instrumental, a child-bearing vessel through which he can "continue the line of the faithful, a royal line" (p. 104). Baldwin thus seems to imply that sexual objectification, as a method of racial formation and control, has made marriage an exploitative institution, too.

The other notable female character in "Gabriel's Prayer" is Esther, a thin, vivid, dark-eyed girl who functions as something of a foil to the ugly, intensely devout Deborah. Esther is very beautiful, is often in the company of young men, and rarely goes to church. She is "associated in [Gabriel's] mind with flame; ... with the eternal fires of Hell" (p. 111). Gabriel has an intense and plainly erotic desire to save Esther and to bring her "on her knees before the altar" (p. 112). He is caught in a dialectic between body and soul that largely parallels John Grimes's struggle on the threshing floor.³⁷ As Baldwin puts it:

[Gabriel] wanted to weep. He wanted to reach out and hold her back from the destruction she so ardently pursued—to fold her in him, and hide her until the wrath of God was past. At the same time there rose to his nostrils again her whisky-laden breath, and beneath this, faint, intimate, the odor of her body. And he began to feel like a man in a nightmare, who stands in the path of oncoming destruction, who must move quickly—but who cannot move. (p. 120)

Unable to resist temptation and deny his inner, carnal desire, Gabriel has a nine-day affair with Esther. Gabriel's desires are laden with tropes of darkness, sin, and dirtiness. Through Esther, Baldwin implies that these dark, racialized desires doom the relationship from the beginning.³⁸ Referring to herself in the third person, Esther accuses Gabriel of shame and hypocrisy: "I reckon you don't want no whore like Esther for your wife. Esther's just for the night, for the dark, where won't nobody see you getting your holy self all dirtied up with your Esther" (p. 127). These racialized tropes thus corrupt Gabriel's desire and set him in conflict with his own sexuality.

Read through the lens of Hortense Spillers's famous essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Esther can be understood as a victim of racist stereotypes about black women. Tropes of hypersexuality transform the black female body into "the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality."³⁹ Spillers argues that, once subsumed into these transhistorical narratives about sin and sexuality, black women become "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean."⁴⁰ Here, Esther is trapped by an understanding of sexuality that "borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person."⁴¹ Esther, like Deborah, is technically emancipated but captive nonetheless.

Gabriel has plainly internalized these myths. In one scene, Baldwin describes Gabriel looking at Esther and writes: "There was only Esther, who contained in her narrow body all mystery and all passion, and who answered all his need" (p. 121). Gabriel's sexuality is so devoid of affection, in fact, that it reduces Esther to a thing, possessed by the captor and interchangeable with other captive black female bodies. Baldwin writes: "Having possessed Esther, the carnal man [in Gabriel] awoke, seeing the possibility of conquest everywhere. ... [H]e had but to stretch out his hand and take what he wanted—even sisters in the church" (p. 122). Gabriel's sexuality veers between two poles that either repress desire entirely or subject black women to it indiscriminately.

But as with Deborah, Esther's sexuality makes her impure and blameworthy. In this view, Esther used her body to seduce Gabriel with "the age-old cunning of a woman." Gabriel can displace the blame for his sin: "'Yes,' he answered, rising and turning away, 'Satan tempted me and I fell. I ain't the first man been made to fall on account of a wicked woman'" (p. 126). The trope of the wicked woman eroticizes Esther while simultaneously making her liable for Gabriel's desire. It

seems, then, that the paradoxical and racialized tropes of black lasciviousness that made Deborah simultaneously a target for rape and a symbol of blame function similarly for Esther. Though Gabriel reads her blackness as proof of her sensuality and guilt, he simultaneously uses it to objectify her.

Sometime during the affair, Esther becomes pregnant. When Gabriel learns the news, he is deeply ashamed: "It was in the womb of Esther, who was no better than a harlot, that the seed of the prophet would be nourished" (p. 124). He is frightened of the consequences and struggles to avoid blame. He refuses to marry Esther and rejects the idea that he is now partially responsible for the baby. Esther complains that though she was desirable enough to impregnate, she is now consigned to "go out and have *your* bastard somewhere in the goddamn woods" (pp. 127–8. Emphasis in original.) As Esther so wrenchingly recognizes, it is Gabriel's guilt that divests desire from affection and cleaves sexuality from paternity. By objectifying Esther, Gabriel throws the very idea of blood relations into disarray, since he fathers a child that he then refuses to claim. Consequently, Spillers notes, "the child does become, under the press of a patronymic, patrifocal, and patriarchal order, the man/woman on the boundary, whose human and familial status ... had yet to be defined."⁴² Esther is right about Gabriel's hypocrisy; she is, if anything, understating its impact on their unborn child.

Through Gabriel, Baldwin extends the idea of bastardization as an ambiguous status shared by all black people in America. Gabriel bemoans the fact that there was no black woman in his community "who had not seen her father, her brother, her lover, or her son cut down without mercy; who had not seen her sister become part of the white man's great whorehouse" (p. 132). Similarly, there is no black man "whose manhood had not been, at the root, sickened, whose loins had not been dishonored, whose seed had not been scattered into oblivion and worse than oblivion, into living shame and rage, and into endless battle" (p. 132). Black people are "a bastard people, far from God, singing and crying in the wilderness!" (p. 132). The corrosion is total: white racism corrupts sexuality, which, in turn, corrupts gender and the family. As Hortense Spillers summarizes: "the customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire' are thrown into unrelieved crisis."⁴³ It follows, then, that marriage and family would be disrupted, too.

Again, lest this feel too much like a reading backwards, this is an argument that Baldwin often espoused in interviews and one he believed to be rooted in slavery. In 1961, Baldwin told Studs Terkel that the economies of black labor had disrupted marriage, masculinity, and motherhood. Specifically, Baldwin presents a problem of black motherhood and domestic labor: "Negro women for generations have raised white children, who sometimes lynched *their* children, and they have tried to raise their own child, like a man; and yet in the full knowledge that if he really walks around like a man he is going to be cut down."⁴⁴ The fact that Esther and Gabriel's child was conceived in a white family's kitchen is likely meant as an ironic illustration of the connection between economic exploitation and bastardization.

Baldwin was obsessed with his own illegitimacy and frequently employed metaphors of fathers and sons in his writing. But he was also entering into conversation with a long and varied debate over the role of marriage in the struggle for racial progress. In the late nineteenth century, many newly freed African Americans celebrated their newfound ability to make relationships legitimate in the eyes of the court—an ability that Ann duCille aptly calls a “long-denied basic human right.”⁴⁵ They eagerly capitalized on their legal right to marry and to claim their children as legal descendants. Claudia Tate places marriage alongside enfranchisement as “twin indexes for measuring how black people collectively valued their civil liberties.”⁴⁶ Then, by the middle of the twentieth century, black nationalists claimed heterosexual marriage not just as “natural” but as a necessity, a key way to withstand racial oppression.⁴⁷ In these rather conservative accounts, marriage is a social ideal that black families should—and did—strive to reach.

It is Richard, Elizabeth’s lover—and John’s biological father—who struggles most obviously with marriage as a sexual (and economic) ideal. Richard also comes closest to Baldwin’s vision of embodied, revelatory love. Elizabeth meets Richard in 1919, when she is “one year younger than the century” (p. 152). She is instantly attracted to the “very thin, and beautiful, and nervous” 22-year-old Richard. He moved like a cat, and shared “a cat’s impressive, indifferent aloofness, his face closed, in his eyes no light at all” (p. 152). From the first, Richard seems to exist outside the binaries and logics that dominate the rest of the novel—he is lightless, attractive, insolent. Richard, like Elizabeth, had lost his mother at a young age and, also like Elizabeth, had grown up without much contact with his father. The impact of their meeting is instantaneous and profound. Elizabeth “lived, in those days, in a fiery storm, of which Richard was the center and the heart. And she fought only to reach him—only that” (p. 156). By the end of the summer of their first meeting, they have made plans to move to New York City together to get married.

In New York City, though, Richard and Elizabeth have to confront “the problem of their life together” (p. 157). For the most part, that problem is material. Richard and Elizabeth cannot get married as quickly as they had hoped, since Richard makes very little money during the day and goes to school at night. Both Richard and Elizabeth live in somewhat squalid rooms in Harlem. Though Elizabeth does not understand it, the problem is racial: they were a young black couple, trapped “beneath the towers of the white city, with people, white, hurrying all around them” (p. 159). Richard often takes Elizabeth to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he looks with melancholy wonder on African statuettes and totem poles that Elizabeth does not understand. And Elizabeth, for her part, has a problem that Richard does not: chastity. In New York, that “great city where no one cared,” it is much more difficult for Elizabeth to resist Richard than it was down home. She soon finds herself, “when Richard took her in his arms, on the edge of a steep place: and down she rushed, on the descent uncaring, into the dreadful sea” (p. 157). She loses what her pious aunt called her “pearl without price” (p. 157); she becomes a fallen woman.

One dimension of the problem of Elizabeth and Richard's life together seems to be what Patricia Hill Collins summarizes as a hegemonic notion of gender where "the vast majority of the population accepts ideas about gender complementarity that privilege the masculinity of propertied, heterosexual White men as natural, normal and beyond reproach."⁴⁸ In Collins's logic, Richard is forced to aspire to white, heteronormative values that are closely tied to property, labor, and the family. The couple moves to New York City in pursuit of two such aspirational opportunities: better jobs and marriage. The problem, though, is that those values were far out of reach for the vast majority of black people in the 1930s. Roderick Ferguson writes in *Aberrations in Black*: "The heteronormative household was practically a 'material impossibility' for people of color as the U.S. 'family wage' in the early twentieth century defined the American home as white, heterosexual, and American, and thereby excluded people of color."⁴⁹ The "problem" that Elizabeth describes is thus one of expectation versus actuality, of the ideal undercut by the real.

Baldwin understood the material problems of marriage because he had quite nearly lived them. In his dialogue with Nikki Giovanni, Baldwin remembers himself at age 22, planning to get married. But "for several reasons I threw my wedding rings in the river and split, decided I would leave. I didn't get married partly because I had no future, and that's very, very important."⁵⁰ A lengthy debate between Baldwin and Giovanni ensues, spanning twenty-odd pages of the book, with Baldwin relentlessly emphasizing the black man's internalized responsibility to provide for his family economically. He bases this material definition of masculinity on his father. Baldwin says to Giovanni: "I had to watch my father and what my father had to endure to raise nine children on twenty-seven dollars and fifty cents a week—when he was working."⁵¹ Baldwin is articulating a vision of manhood in which, as described by Maurice Wallace, marriage is not a sentimental sensibility but a material imperative demanded by the manly condition.⁵²

Richard is tormented by marriage, a racialized and gendered ideal that he can never achieve. New York City creates a disjuncture between opportunity and access that resonates in Richard's very flesh. Elizabeth realizes in New York, that "hollow, ringing city," that Richard's nervousness was the product of "a tension so total, and so without hope, or possibility of release, or resolution, that she felt it in his muscles, and heard it in his breathing, even as on her breast he fell asleep" (p. 158). Other black men feel it, too. Elizabeth describes the boys who stand on street corners, in poolrooms, and before drugstore windows "whose lean bodies fairly rang, it seemed, with idleness, and malice, and frustration" (p. 172). In Collins's logic, this tension is activated by hegemonic masculinity, which "is fundamentally a dynamic, relational construct."⁵³ Richard, and innumerable other men like him, are inscribed in a system that defines masculinity according to racist and heteronormative values while simultaneously excluding and subordinating men of color as a way to privilege white male masculinity. Richard and his peers in Harlem find only frustration in the American economy. Perhaps that is why Richard looks so longingly at African figures in museums—he seeks, though

he does not say it outright, an understanding of gender defined by something other than white men's norms.

Elizabeth, in turn, accepts the norms of hegemonic masculinity and subordinates herself to Richard. She tries to use her body instrumentally to shore up Richard's masculinity. She lives in a constant state of negation. Baldwin writes:

She did not leave him, because she was afraid of what would happen to him without her. She did not resist him, because he needed her. And she did not press about marriage because, upset as he was about everything, she was afraid of having him upset about her, too. She thought of herself as his strength; in a world of shadows, the indisputable reality to which he could always repair. (p. 158)

As Trudier Harris points out, these notions of gender complementarity and relational masculinity consistently subordinate black women in Baldwin's fiction and trap them in matrices of guilt and self-policing. They become "willing scapegoats" to the whims of the male ego.⁵⁴ As Elizabeth piercingly wonders: "How could she hope, alone, and in famine as she was, to put herself between him [Richard] and this so wide and raging destruction?" (p. 173). Elizabeth is right to doubt her efficacy as a shield from racism and aspirational masculinity. She is powerless to stop Richard from being arrested, along with a few other black boys, in a case of mistaken identity. Richard is beaten by the police and, after his release, he falls into a deep depression. Elizabeth is alarmed by his tears—she had only seen one other man weep before—and decides not to tell him that she is pregnant.

Later, Elizabeth comes to believe that her gendered assumptions about Richard's masculinity and, subsequently, her feminine duty, had produced disastrous results. That night, Richard "cut his wrists with his razor and he was found in the morning by his landlady, his eyes staring upward with no light, dead among the scarlet sheets" (p. 168). This theme—suicide as the only available resolution to the ringing, impossible tension that was embedded so deeply in black men's bodies—is one that Baldwin knew from personal experience. Baldwin lost many friends to suicide, and would attempt it himself four times over the course of his life.⁵⁵ After Richard kills himself, Elizabeth is left alone, devastated, forever wondering if she "had lost her love because she had not, in the end, believed in it enough" (p. 162). Though it was racism that killed Richard, not Elizabeth, she is haunted by a lingering, gendered suspicion that she had misread his strength; she wonders whether a pregnancy might have made Richard stronger, not broken him.

Regrettably, then, Baldwin closes off the possibility of an alternative, less materialist ideal of marriage. It is impossible to read Elizabeth's subsequent marriage to Gabriel—a rigid man who loves Elizabeth because of her assertion that "'folks sure better not do in the dark what they's scared to look at in the light'" (p. 179)—as liberatory or emancipatory. Since John is raised believing that Gabriel is his biological father, Richard stands in the background of the novel as a blacker and more beautiful father than John—and, by proxy, Baldwin—never had the luxury to know.

Remarkably, it is Esther, Deborah, and Richard, three of the novel's most marginalized and oppressed characters, who most emphatically and eloquently resist the totalizing constructions of black sexuality that surrounded Baldwin's early work. Richard's death, for instance, reads as the loss of a hero, the novel's one true lover. Despite his seemingly insurmountable struggle to make life manageable in New York City, Richard had always made Elizabeth happy, "and until the very end he had been very good to her, had not ceased to love her, and tried always to make her know it" (p. 158). Richard was unconventional and often inaccessible to Elizabeth but, like Deborah and Esther, his anomalous traits read as strengths. Baldwin continues: "What life had made him bear, her lover, this wild unhappy boy, many another stronger and more virtuous man might not have borne so well" (p. 158). Importantly, Baldwin remains open to the possibility of healthy, whole black relationships, though he clearly doubts the viability of the marriage ideal. Rather than indicting black people or the black family, Richard's suicide indicts the economic inequalities that make marriage an impossible economic arrangement for black people.

Similarly, rather than force Gabriel into marriage, Esther chooses to move north to raise her child alone. Spillers might describe this as a choice not to pursue gendered femaleness, but to instead create "*insurgent* ground as a female social subject."⁵⁶ The liberatory psychology of this decision does not escape Baldwin. He writes: "I ... just want to go somewhere," she said, "go somewhere, and *have* my baby, and think all this out of my mind. I want to go somewhere and get my mind straight" (p. 128). In fact, Esther offers the reader another dimension of Baldwin's theology of the flesh.⁵⁷ When Gabriel attempts to shame her, Esther says: "I ain't ashamed of *it*—I'm ashamed of *you*—you done made me feel a shame I ain't never felt before. I shamed before my *God*—to let somebody make me cheap" (p. 128. Emphasis in original.) Unfortunately, like Richard, Esther finally succumbs to economic pressures. Though her family sends what money they can, Esther struggles to survive in Chicago. Soon after her child is born, Esther dies; her son with Gabriel is eventually killed in a knife fight in a dirty bar room.

Although Deborah is the character most deeply embedded in structures of oppression, Baldwin gives her a moment of insurgency, too. After Esther and her son die in Chicago, Deborah confronts Gabriel about the affair and, crucially, she rejects Gabriel's attempts to blame Esther for his sins. "'Esther weren't no harlot,' she [Deborah] said quietly" (p. 143). Though small, in the context of Deborah's character this is a beautifully emancipatory moment. By speaking up, Deborah counters what Evelyn Hammonds terms the "imposed production of silence" that has reinforced the marginalization and oppression of black women.⁵⁸ She is siding with Esther over Gabriel; though Deborah is as devout as her husband, she seems to hold less hypocritical notions of right and wrong.

"I think that what one of the jobs of political leaders going forward is," Obama asserted at the close of his interview with Kakutani, "is to tell a better story about what binds us together as people."⁵⁹ President Obama's use of the comparative—better, not best—suggests a project that is both cumulative and ongoing. Baldwin

fits well within this agenda: to put some of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*'s most sophisticated ideas in the mouths of the novel's most minor characters is a fascinating artistic choice—a choice that, in Obama's terms, offers a way of “seeing and hearing the voices, the multitudes.”⁶⁰ Though marginal, Deborah, Esther, and Richard are subversive and destabilizing figures in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. They are simultaneously victimized by, and critical of, American attitudes toward blackness and sexuality.⁶¹ Esther and Richard's deaths and Deborah's unhappy marriage are meant to dismantle, not confirm, the deeply held and tragically inaccurate assumptions that undergird racism and sexism in America. Without these three characters, the reader would have no credible alternatives to Gabriel and Elizabeth's intense, racialized theology and unhappy marriage. If, as Obama asks, we turn now to our political leaders for unifying stories, Baldwin stands as a reminder that any meaningful American narrative will necessarily include and amplify minor voices.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “The American Dream and the American Negro” (1965), in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 715.
- 2 Nikki Giovanni and James Baldwin, *A Dialogue* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1973), p. 71.
- 3 Barack Obama, “Transcript: President Obama on What Books Mean to Him,” *The New York Times*, 16 January 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/01/16/books/transcript-president-obama-on-what-books-mean-to-him.html (accessed 21 April 2017).
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Baldwin, “The American Dream,” p. 714.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Dwight A. McBride, “Introduction,” in Dwight A. McBride (ed.), *James Baldwin Now* (New York, New York University Press, 1999), p. 4.
- 8 Baldwin, “The American Dream,” p. 715.
- 9 Baldwin's various conflicts with the American publishing establishment are well documented. In particular, see W. J. Weatherly, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (New York, Donald I. Fine, 1989), pp. 96–9, and Fern Marja Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (New York, M. Evans & Co., 1966), p. 137.
- 10 James Baldwin, quoted in T. E. Cassidy, “The Long Struggle,” *The Commonweal*, 58 (22 May 1953), p. 186.
- 11 There is a wealth of material, from Baldwin and others, on the various hostilities to his early work. On language, see James Baldwin, “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 819; James Baldwin, “If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?,” in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 780–3; and, on a closely related subject, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16; on culture, see Craig Loftin, *Masked Voices: Gay Men and Lesbians in Cold War America* (Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 4.
- 12 Paul Pickrel, “Outstanding Novels,” *The Yale Review*, 42:3 (1953), p. 10.

- 13 For critical attention to Part Two when *Go Tell It* was published, see John Henry Raleigh, "Messages and Sagas," *New Republic*, 128 (22 June 1953), p. 21; *The Nation*, 176 (6 June 1953), p. 488; J. Saunders Redding, "Sensitive Portrait of a Lonely Boy," *New York Herald-Tribune Book Review*, 17 May 1953, p. 186; Trudier Harris (ed.), *New Essays on "Go Tell It on the Mountain"* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 15; for contemporary critical work, see Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 105–7.
- 14 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), in *Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 15. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers are given in parentheses in the text. Additional chronological information is interspersed throughout Part Two. For Florence's age at the time of Deborah's rape, see *ibid.*, p. 64; for Florence's age in 1900, see *ibid.*, p. 71; for Gabriel's age in 1900, see *ibid.*, p. 92; for Esther's arrival sometime around 1900, see *ibid.*, p. 111; for Royal's age in 1917, see *ibid.*, p. 135; for Elizabeth's and Richard's ages in 1919, see *ibid.*, p. 152; for Elizabeth moving to New York in 1920, see *ibid.*, p. 156; for John's approximate age in 1919, see *ibid.*, p. 170.
- 15 James Baldwin, "An Interview with James Baldwin" (29 December 1961), with Studs Terkel, *Almanac*, WFMT Radio, transcribed in Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson, MS, University Press of Mississippi, 1989), p. 10.
- 16 Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, p. 87.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 97. For a similar articulation from Baldwin himself, see James Baldwin, "Race, Hate, Sex and Colour: A Conversation with James Baldwin and Colin MacInnes," in Standley and Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin*, p. 55.
- 18 I use "queer" in a sense that largely matches Valerie Traub's explanation of "queer [as] intelligible only in relation to [specific] social norms." She criticizes a "new unhistoricism" in queer theory that employs overly generalized concepts of normativity. Thus for my purposes, Deborah, Esther, and Richard are queer in relation to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century norms of rape and marriage described elsewhere in this essay. See Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 4.
- 19 Giovanni and Baldwin, *A Dialogue*, pp. 19–20.
- 20 Here, Baldwin's problematic use of "my" suggests difficulty divorcing himself from exploitative definitions of black female sexuality. See Baldwin, "The American Dream," p. 715.
- 21 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 6.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 23 Patricia Williams, "On Being the Object of Property," in Martha Fineman and Nancy Thomadsen (eds.), *At the Boundaries of Law: Feminism and Legal Theory* (New York, Routledge, 1991), p. 24.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 25 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 82.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 28 Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, p. 104.

- 29 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 81.
- 30 Williams, "Object of Property," p. 25.
- 31 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 101.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 33 Quoted in Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, p. 89.
- 34 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 89–90.
- 35 Williams, "Object of Property," p. 25.
- 36 Baldwin, *Go Tell It*, p. 69.
- 37 For more on Baldwin's understanding of the body as holy, see Clarence Hardy, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville, TN, University of Tennessee Press, 2005), p. 63.
- 38 Beginning with "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin consistently critiqued the racialized need to "bury, as St. Paul demanded, 'the carnal man, the man of the flesh.'" See James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (1949), in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, p. 14.
- 39 Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in Winston Napier (ed.), *African American Literary Theory, A Reader* (New York, New York University Press, 2000), p. 260.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 44 Baldwin, interview with Studs Terkel, pp. 9–10.
- 45 Quoted in Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2012), p. 99.
- 46 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 98.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 48 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York, Routledge, 2004), p. 186.
- 49 Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, p. 104.
- 50 Giovanni and Baldwin, *A Dialogue*, p. 56.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 52 Maurice Wallace, "'I Rose a Freeman': Power, Property, and the Performance of Manhood in the Slave Narratives," in John Ernest (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 270.
- 53 Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, p. 186.
- 54 Trudier Harris, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin* (Knoxville, TN, University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 12–60.
- 55 See David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 34.
- 56 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," p. 278.
- 57 See Hardy, *James Baldwin's God*, p. 63.
- 58 Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," in Napier (ed.), *African American Literary Theory, A Reader*, p. 488.
- 59 Obama, "What Books Mean."
- 60 Obama, "What Books Mean."

- 61 Baldwin frequently described American ideas about race and sexuality as "anxieties," "terrors," or a "panic." See, particularly, James Baldwin, "Preservation of Innocence," in Morrison (ed.), *Collected Essays*, pp. 599–600, and Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," pp. 828–9.

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