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# Papas' Baby: Impossible Paternity in Going to Meet the Man

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## **Papas' Baby: Impossible Paternity in *Going to Meet the Man***

Near the end of his life, James Baldwin wrote in the introduction to his collected essays, *The Price of the Ticket*, that “white people are not white: part of the price of the white ticket is to delude themselves into believing that they are.... America is not, and never can be, white” (*Price*, xiv). Marlon Ross thus distinguishes Baldwin from W.E.B. Dubois: “For Baldwin, it is not ‘the strange meaning of being black’ that is the ‘problem of the Twentieth Century,’ nor even ‘the problem of the color line.’ Baldwin makes the central problem of the twentieth century the strange meaning of being white, as a structure of felt experience that motivates and is motivated by other denials” (25).

This essay examines the strange meaning of being white in Baldwin’s 1965 short story collection, *Going to Meet the Man*, arguing that “The Rockpile,” “The Man Child,” and “Going to Meet the Man”—the three stories original to the collection—act as recursive and interlocking texts that urgently demand comparative analysis, bound together as they are by their cumulative power to defamiliarize, to make strange, whiteness. That strangeness is, indeed, an estrangement, for these stories powerfully cleave white fathers from white sons as they reveal the secret obscured by the price of the white ticket: that whiteness cannot be reproduced. Nowhere in his fiction does Baldwin, whose complexity of vision continues to unsettle both liberal and conservative approaches to race in America, more compellingly evoke the white father’s anxiety about reproducing race and thereby sustaining the white paternal order. Nowhere does Baldwin so poignantly show the white man’s denial—so hidden and so costly—to be his own impossible paternity.

As my title implies, I am indebted in my critical approach to Hortense Spillers' ever-suggestive 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Raising the issues of paternal presence and absence with which I will be concerned, Spillers argues that in African American slavery "a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father's *banished* name and body and the captor father's mocking presence. In this play of paradox," Spillers continues, "only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed" (80). The two fathers, in sharp contrast to the literal flesh of the mother, become figurative, disembodied entities. This is true for different reasons. The absence of the African or African American father, long a national motif, was guaranteed on the one hand by the law that denied him the privilege of patrimony—his name was banished—and on the other hand by the likelihood of his physical separation through sale or death from his biological offspring. The captor father, likewise, was only a "mocking presence," an absence that stems from a certain rhetorical exclusion made possible under the system of American slavery. Spillers explains that "[t]he denied genetic link [between the master and his slave child] becomes the chief strategy of an undenied ownership, as if the interrogation into the father's identity—the blank space where his proper name will fit—were answered by the fact, *de jure* of a material possession" (76). Ironically, the master could not be both father *and* owner (though of course he often was), and the ability to deny fatherhood was predicated precisely upon the master's identity as property owner. Thus the "mocking" presence of the master/father: the more present the master, the more absent the father.

I want to foreground two ideas about paternal possibilities implicit in Spillers' critique of gender and race relations stemming from the African American slave trade. The first

is that we take seriously the idea that fatherhood is a pliable and deeply contested construct marked by bifurcations, disavowals, and strange investments that produce a variety of forms of paternal agency. Therefore, in the context of raced masculinity in America, fatherhood must by extension *always* be understood figuratively, even when literal patrimony is not in question. It is in this interplay of the literal and the figurative, in the tension between the biological and the socially legislated, that the role of the white father is mystified. One of the goals of this essay is to contribute to the increasingly nuanced conversation between critical race studies and queer theory by troubling white paternity so as to dramatize the failure of normative biological narratives of reproduction to grapple with this crisis of race-making. The “confusions of consanguinity” that Spillers identifies as fertile ground for an investigation of how the African American female in captivity was (de)gendered will therefore be expanded to include literally impossible but figuratively compelling paternal relations, in particular those that demand the eroticized “presence” of the black man in the white father’s bed as part of a paternal fantasy intent on producing white sons. Ironically, with the *absent* black father a fixture in the cultural imaginary, Baldwin locates him where no one else had looked: at the heart of white paternity.

I will argue that a dual, interracial fatherhood emerges from that unnerving reconciliation and that indeed the price of that union is unthinkable for the white man. Ultimately the progeny of a white father divided within himself by his erotic dependence on the black man, the son produced by the paternal struggle for racial purity—papas’ baby, mama’s maybe, so to speak—is not only erotically “illegitimate” but, despite his fathers’ intentions, racially ambiguous. In Baldwin’s figural race logic, the paternal

attempt to indelibly inscribe race on all bodies ultimately generates a state of racelessness.

### **Black-Father-Blood: Reproducing Race in “The Rockpile”**

While the primary aim of this essay is to reevaluate the racial integrity and erotic investments of the white father in *Going to Meet the Man*,<sup>1</sup> that paternal figure comes fully into view only against the backdrop of black fatherhood in “The Rockpile.” Baldwin opens the collection by emphasizing how property rights have been inimical to the black man’s paternal rights in America and how, in response, “black blood” has become a singularly flexible signifier of black paternity. Like Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, “The Rockpile” is set in the Harlem apartment of Gabriel and Elizabeth Grimes.<sup>2</sup> The urban rockpile that looms outside the Grimes’ apartment window symbolizes the hard and unusable land of a disinherited black people, a fact thrown into sharp relief by the lush and fertile fields handed down from white father to white son in “The Man Child.” A disputed plot upon which the neighborhood boys ceaselessly struggle in an ironic, because unwinnable, game of king of the mountain, the rockpile functions foremost as a reminder of impossible ownership and racial disenfranchisement; the black boys will not inherit the rockpile, for their fathers do not own it.

Without property or material entitlements, the black father, Gabriel, must look elsewhere for manifestation of his posterity. When his son Roy is injured while play-fighting on the rockpile, Gabriel sees in his son’s blood the symbol of his paternal legacy, raced as that legacy is by the erasure of property rights. Examining the cut above his son’s eye, Gabriel comforts Roy: “You don’t want to cry. You’s Daddy’s little man.

Tell your Daddy what happened.... Don't cry. Daddy ain't going to hurt you, he just wants to see this bandage, see what they've done to his little man" (16-17). Roy's blood provokes in Gabriel a possessive reaction: neatly responding to the racial threat to black fatherhood, Gabriel's invocation of "his little man" collapses the roles of paternal and proprietary "caretaker."

At the center of this paternal reclamation, blood functions as the substance through which race is made transitive from black father to black son. Crucially, however, Roy's blood is equivalent to and an irreplaceable marker of Gabriel's paternity not because of a biological or genetic link but because that paternity cannot be concretized through the investment of property with paternal meaning. In other words, racial inheritance attaches to the black son's blood not through faulty metaphors of race science but through a privileged interiority that compensates for an exterior disenfranchisement. Indeed, the father/son blood bond in "The Rockpile" is de-biologized by the weight of history, of what it means to be a black father in America.

Significantly, however, Gabriel locates the threat to his paternal legacy not on the rockpile amidst the gangs of warring boys nor within the larger context of white oppression of blacks but, translating racial vulnerability into gender advantage, within his own house. Wanting to "see what *they've* done to his little man," Gabriel refers primarily to Elizabeth and John, the sinful wife and her bastard son from a previous relationship whose blood holds no value for Gabriel. First blaming Elizabeth for her carelessness, Gabriel then turns on John, threatening to "take a strap" to him for not being forthcoming about his failure to watch over his brother and protect him from harm. As Elizabeth and "Johnnie" become the true enemy, we see that the father's concern for "his" son's

physical condition belies an underlying anxiety about maternal influences. Not only is the maternal bond between Elizabeth and “her” son foregrounded and juxtaposed to the paternal bond between Gabriel and Roy, but John also serves as his mother’s surrogate, sharing her maternal duties. Although their maternal positioning protects them to some extent from Gabriel’s anger—Elizabeth and John hand the baby Ruth back and forth, almost as a shield, during the argument with Gabriel—it also represents the threat against which Gabriel rages.

Though Roy’s is no more than a flesh wound, the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” at work here—the phrase is Spillers’—are made readable as a crucial gendering of the blood that flows from that wound. Gabriel does not simply define paternity narrowly, as a matter of biology, in his rejection of John and protection of Roy. Rather, he exhibits a particular confusion of consanguinity by employing an exclusionary, masculinist logic that debiologizes the parental connection between Elizabeth and Roy—but also, oddly enough, between Roy and himself—and instead invests the blood-moment at the heart of the story with the singularly paternal meaning. As the father becomes sole protector of “his little man,” Roy’s blood, supposedly shed at the hands of a maternal enemy represented by Elizabeth and John, becomes entirely Gabriel’s own. The son’s blood therefore represents a purely masculine inheritance, a gendered bond that eclipses the logic of biological reproduction. This non-biological brand of paternal reproduction has, as I will later show, important implications for white/black male relations elsewhere in Baldwin.

The exclusion of the black mother from the father/son blood bond suggests that a corollary blood logic accompanies the more well known “one drop rule,” a racist



mathematic in which blood, based on the presence or absence of even one drop of “black blood,” is represented as either wholly white or wholly black and whereby no mixed-race identity is possible. The “blackness” of the father/son blood also makes it exclusively masculine as part of what might be called its “property value”; the value of the blood is specifically tied to the black father’s proprietary interests *as a black man*. The black man’s blood thus signifies not only as “black blood” but as the more suggestive “black-father-blood.” The effect of that hypercondensed paternal bond is that blood becomes a strikingly “fluid” signifier, its meaning far outrunning the thing itself, even when blood is also an utterly literal marker of African American suffering and death. “Paternity,” by extension, becomes a similarly flexible familial relation.

### **Whitewashing: Reproducing Race in “The Man Child”**

If the paternal crisis in “The Rockpile” is notable for a black father’s turning inward, quite literally, in an effort to establish what might be called his proprietary masculinity, “The Man Child” reverses that perspective by looking outward through a white father’s eyes at the endless fields and pastures that represent the masculine legacy that he will one day pass on to his son, the young protagonist, Eric. The plot of the story is straightforward: Eric, an only child and sole heir to his father’s property, is strangled by a childless, property-less family friend, Jamie. But unlike the realistic narrative of “The Rockpile,” “The Man Child” draws on mythic conventions, its vast scope and murderous finale suggesting an allegorical reading of both the white father/son bond and the white interloper who ultimately breaks that bond. In the figure of Jamie, Baldwin both “inverts” patriarchal desire and “whitewashes” the racial landscape, and he does so in

order to insist that threats to white paternity are all the more dangerous because they are hidden by and within heteronormative whiteness itself.

“The Man Child” presents a sweeping picture of white male ownership in its endless display of land and sky, a perspective that originates at the farmhouse of young Eric and his parents and then arcs out past the yard’s encircling stone wall to the fields and barns and finally to the far-off cow pastures and beyond. Twice Baldwin gives the reader a tour of the extensive property young Eric will one day inherit from his father. First, in a rite of initiation, Eric’s father, whom Baldwin does not name, reveals to his eight-year-old son his destiny as landowner. Walking together, father and son stand high above the land they survey: “Then they walked till they came to the steep slope which led to the railroad tracks, down, down, far below them, where a small train seemed to be passing forever through the countryside, smoke, like the very definition of idleness, blowing out of the chimney stack of the toy locomotive” (59). The perspective, elevated and dominant, is deceiving in its diminution of the train and the aggrandizement of man and man child. Rather than presenting the men as small or insignificant in comparison to the greatness of the land, Baldwin reverses the scale, emphasizing the comprehensive authority of the white landowner over his possessions. Master of all he sees and owner of all he touches, Eric stands at the very center of a world that has always been his own, from “the day you were born,” his father tells him.

The second tour, on which Eric explores the far reaches of his land alone, culminates appropriately with a vision of the centripetal force that accrues around the privileged white heir:

Eric pretended that he was his father and was walking through the fields as he had seen his father walk, looking it all over calmly, pleased, knowing

that everything he saw belonged to him. And he stopped and pee'd as he had seen his father do, standing wide-legged and heavy in the middle of the fields; he pretended at the same time to be smoking and talking as he had seen his father do. Then, having watered the ground, he walked on, and all the earth, for that moment, in Eric's eyes, seemed to be celebrating Eric. (64)

Imitating the father, the son engages in a phallic display of authority over the land that confirms and celebrates his proprietary masculinity. The seemingly endless property rises to meet Eric as though part of an uninterrupted male ego, one that is specifically raced when read against formations of manhood in "The Rockpile." White masculinity, unlike black masculinity, extends outward into the land itself in Eric's symbolic act of watering the ground, an act of fertilization that emphasizes the connection between the farmer and the father, property and white paternity. If Eric understands, however, that he is pretending, forging a bond with his father by play acting, white paternity ignores its own performativity, and thus its vulnerability, as it naturalizes its entitlements.

Indeed, to Eric's father the son's destiny as landowner is so seamlessly connected to his appropriation of phallic power that it becomes coterminous with his destiny as progenitor. Eric's father thus explains Eric's position as property owner by prescribing the reproductive role the boy will play:

"When I get to be a real old man," said his father... "you're going to have to take care of all this [land]. When I die it's going to be yours." He paused and stopped; Eric looked up at him. "When you get to be a big man, like your Papa, you're going to get married and have children. And all this is going to be theirs."

"And when *they* get married?" Eric prompted.

"All this will belong to *their* children," his father said.

"Forever?" cried Eric.

"Forever," said his father. (60)

Not quite sure of his position in the unending lineage imagined by his father, Eric inquires further into his new role:

“Will I?” asked Eric.

“Will you what?” asked his father.

“Will I get married and have a little boy?”

His father seemed for a moment both amused and checked. He looked down at Eric with a strange, slow smile. “Of course you will,” he said at last. “Of course you will.” And he held out his arms. “Come,” he said, “climb up. I’ll ride you on my shoulders home.”

So Eric rode on his father’s shoulders through the wide green fields which belonged to him, into the yard which held the house which would hear the first cries of his children. (60)

Eric’s naive and narcissistic question, “Will I get married and have a little boy?”, exposes an interesting set of connections. Foremost, we see the heteronormalizing function of property rights in the story. “Taking care of the land” means both making the land productive *and* becoming reproductive oneself, indeed, “forever” reproducing oneself, as Eric’s prediction of “little *boy*” implies. Eric’s father apparently takes that association for granted, thus his surprise when Eric asks the question. But the father’s response, his “strange, slow smile,” followed by the protective measure of carrying Eric home on his shoulders, also suggests that perhaps the heteronormative end of which he assures his son is not as inevitable as his repeated reply, “of course,” might indicate.

For Eric’s father’s smile hides a fear of reproductive failure. Baldwin thematizes that failure in two separate but related ways: the literal inability to reproduce children and the symbolic inability to reproduce whiteness. This dual threat to the hetero-reproductive, racially “pure” paternal legacy stands at the center of “The Man Child.” Already Eric’s father has buried two miscarried children and so is well aware of the precarious nature of the idyllic family story he tells Eric. Furthermore, after these miscarriages Eric’s mother has become infertile, leaving Eric as the precarious link to future generations of white sons and landowners. The mother’s inability to conceive other children then initiates her withdrawal and, “shrunk[en] within herself, away from them all, even, in a kind of storm

of love and helplessness, away from Eric” (62), the barren mother is effectively elided from the family romance. A similar dynamic plays out in each of the three stories analyzed here: Elizabeth is marginalized by the over-protective father in “The Rockpile” and Grace becomes a mere instrument upon which Jessie plays out his homoerotically- and racially-charged fears of remaining childless in “Going to Meet the Man.” Ironically, these mothers are displaced or subordinated by men intent upon securing their own paternal positions in the procreative order, a father fantasy that is dependent—but blindly so—upon the women it erases. Not surprisingly, the father/son bonds in these stories become more urgent and more tenuous as the mothers vanish and as the project of generation becomes an increasingly all-male affair.

Eric’s father’s “strange, slow smile” also attempts to cover over a less visible threat to the paternal legacy in “The Man Child,” one that arises from within and invisibly imperils white fatherhood. That threat is embodied in Jamie, Eric’s father’s best friend, his life-long companion and a constant presence in Eric’s life: “They had been destructing [the local tavern] long before Eric had kicked in his mother’s belly, for Eric’s father and Jamie had grown up together, gone to war together, and survived together—never, apparently, while life ran, were they to be divided” (49). Indivisible, the two men have over time become strangely united by their polar differences rather than their similarities. Jamie’s wife has run away, he is childless, and he has lost his farm, which Eric’s father has purchased. Like Eric’s father, Jamie was once young, propertied, and “inevitably” reproductive, but without an heir his name will be lost to future generations. A paradox, Jamie represents a nearly unthinkable endpoint, a failure of the white paternal legacy to reproduce itself.

When, at the end of the story, Jamie suddenly strangles little Eric in the barn, Baldwin dramatically literalizes Jamie's role as interloper in the white family romance. I want to suggest that, both like and unlike what we might call his "life partner," the murderous Jamie symbolizes whiteness divided from itself, a fissure in the white paternal order. That disruption is, I argue below, both sexually and racially coded so that Jamie intervenes into the dual narrative of unquestioned heteronormativity and unblemished whiteness that anchors the reproductive fantasy passed on to Eric by his father. Standing for the threat of inverted desire and racial betrayal, Jamie not only literally murders Eric but symbolically destroys the heteronormative white myth of racial purity.

Jamie's positioning as "invert" within the story is at first more obvious than his role as racial enigma (which is only fully revealed through the comparative analysis of "Going to Meet the Man" that will follow). In an unnamed way, Jamie's relationship to Eric's father seems to have given rise to his failure as husband, father, and landowner, for his connection to his best friend runs deeper and, more precisely, *longer* than it should. Eric's father chides, "*Jamie, Jamie, pumkin-eater, had a wife and couldn't keep her!*" (52), but it isn't at all clear that Jamie *wanted* to keep her. Rather, when Eric's father criticizes his bachelor friend for sitting around and moping about "things that are over and dead and finished, things that can't *ever* begin again, that can't ever be the same again" (55), the "thing" in question does not seem to be married life. Jamie's wife had been, it is suggested, a prostitute with whom Jamie had acted more "poetical," according to Eric's father, than husbandly, preferring to roam the woods alone or drink with his male companion. Rather, the "thing" that is "over and dead" seems to be Jamie's claim upon the man who is now claimed, as his namelessness suggests, solely by his role as

father. According to that father, Jamie has “thought about it too long” to start a new family. But just what has Jamie been thinking of that has kept him a bachelor?

Teased that he is too old to start a family, and therefore with his sexual capacities in question, Jamie responds, “I’m not old. I can still do all the things we used to do” (52). Then, leaning toward Eric’s mother with a threatening grin, Jamie offers to substantiate his past intimacies, specifically those that also involve Eric’s father: “I haven’t ever told you, have I, about the things we used to do?” (52). In quick response to Jamie’s implication that the men share ambiguously sexual secrets, Eric’s father responds with a threat of his own: “He wouldn’t tell you...he knows what I’d do to him if he did.” Whatever it is that the two men used to in their youth, Eric’s father has left it behind and warns that Jamie should do the same, calling him a “dreamer.” The fanciful descriptions of Jamie as “poetical” and a “dreamer” compare poorly to the masculine characterization that Jamie provides of Eric’s father: “I know you’re the giant-killer, the hunter, the lover—the real old Adam, that’s you. I know you’re going to cover the earth. I know the world depends on men like you” (55). Distinguished here from his hetero-reproductive friend and, although he is the elder of the two men, later criticized for not being “as old as he should be,” Jamie occupies the role of a man caught in a state of arrested development, a state in which his erotic energies continue to be focused on the things he and his male companion once did rather than on the procreative things he might be doing with a wife. In classically Freudian terms, Jamie demonstrates “feelings of inversion and fixation of libido on a person of the same sex” (*Three Contributions*, 29), symptoms that supposedly reveal stunted sexual development.

If Jamie is positioned as an “invert,” however, his inversion must foremost be understood in terms of his relation to the white paternal order rather than as a descriptor of his sexual development. His desires run counter to those of his “normal” friend not only in terms of romantic inclination but, more importantly, in terms of proprietary interest. Simply put, Jamie loves the wrong thing—the friend, not the father; the man, not the land—and that love places him outside the procreative and proprietary order that defines white manhood in “The Man Child.” Foil to “the giant-killer, the hunter, the lover, the real old Adam,” Jamie symbolizes an inversion of and a crisis within appropriative, i.e. hetero-reproductive and white, fatherhood. Degout thus concludes that “[little Eric’s] slaughter at the hands of Jamie itself signals a ‘transcendental future’—the demise of the system of patriarchal indoctrination symbolized by the narrative of inheritance that he accepts but which dies with him” (149).

And while “the implication is that the homoerotic urge—or rather, the inability to either affirm or acknowledge it—is, at least in part, what undermines the white male hegemony” (Degout 137), I would argue that it need not follow that Jamie murders Eric primarily because his love “is not returned adequately [by Eric’s father]” (138). Rather, Jamie’s importance as an “invert” lies in the fact that he helps to invert, to turn inside out, what I’ve been calling the hetero-reproductive paternal legacy that creates the illusion of stability in the text. Though Jamie rejects both land and son, that rejection comes from an insider’s point of view, from the position of what might be called the paternal Other. Jamie therefore does not represent an agent of unrequited love—an explicitly sexual invert—so much as his love for Eric’s father is used to symbolize a non-normative or inappropriate desire at the heart of the paternal order and, therefore, a structural duplicity



within white fatherhood. In other words, Baldwin uses Jamie not only to symbolize a threat to the white paternal legacy but to present that threat as existing *within* the father figure himself.

Indeed, the peril Jamie represents is structured by the very proximity to white patriarchy that his resemblance to Eric's father grants him. Although Jamie "lived alone in a wooden house..., Eric's mother kept his clothes clean and Jamie always ate at Eric's house" (50). The result is nearly unfettered access to little Eric. The father's notable absence in the final scene in which Jamie strangles Eric in the barn while, from the house, his mother calls the boy to supper reveals a shift in the family triad. With Eric's father elsewhere, Jamie emerges as a paternal shadow figure—quite literally out of the shadow of the patriarch. Importantly, he does not simply assume the father's authority or position. Trapped in the barn, Eric first desperately attempts to bribe Jamie with the land and the posterity that ownership bestows: "[Y]ou can have the land and you can live forever!" (66). He then tempts Jamie with the even greater promise of fatherhood: "[I]f you kill my father I can be your little boy and we can have it all!" But Eric's betrayal of his father's proprietary interest does nothing to dissuade Jamie. In fact, it helps to confirm Jamie as the shadow father rather than a usurper of white patriarchy. Eric's self-serving attempt to realign his filial bond by refiguring Jamie as the father is thus futile, for his pleas appeal to normative patriarchal desires that hold no purchase for Jamie, a man whose inward desires for male companionship, rather than a male heir, run counter to the hetero-reproductive paternal desires which his outward appearance *should*, in the world of "The Man Child," dictate. Breaking Eric's neck, Jamie resolves that "this land will belong to no one."

Jamie's violent rejection of the material signifiers, both land and son, that not only confer status but also, when compared with "The Rockpile, represent a specifically white paternal legacy, also position him as *racial* outsider. On this point the story remains deceptively silent, its characters so overwhelmingly white that racial otherness passes without notice. Yet within the larger argument of this essay, Jamie's racial liminality marks an interpretive flashpoint for understanding the crisis of white paternity in *Going to Meet the Man*. The racial other who co-exists invisibly at the very heart of whiteness, who nightly shares a table with his lifelong companion, becomes the ultimate threat to white paternity.

For more than racial outsider, Jamie is a race trader. The ultimate concern of this essay will be to explain the importance of the unexpected and deadly intervention into the production of white masculinity that Jamie's brutal and breathtaking murder of little Eric represents. If Jamie's jealousy of his best friend's reproductive capabilities represents an obvious but, ultimately, unsatisfying answer to the question of why he kills Eric, the more compelling explanation lies in the assertion that Jamie represents the symbolic, invisible, and murderous infiltration of otherness, masked by sameness, into the reproductive legacy to which Eric ought to be heir.

Only by turning to "Going to Meet the Man," a story that more directly examines the complex racial workings of American paternity, can the full implications of Jamie's prophesy, "this land will belong to no one," and indeed his identity as paternal Other, be understood. My reading of "Going to Meet the Man," a story in which the black man's body is viciously internalized by the white man as part of a racist fantasy of reproduction, will allow me to return to and expand my claims about "The Man Child" in order to posit

a more general confluence of racial and erotic inversions by which the black father is forcibly compelled to exist within the reproduction narrative of the white patriarchal order. Revealing the production of whiteness to be marked by the distinct appropriations of black male bodies (in addition to female bodies generally), I will suggest that an invisible and disturbing fantasy of interracial homoerotic male union underlies the heterosexual reproduction of “race.”

### **Homoerotic Father-wishes in “Going to Meet the Man”**

If “The Rockpile” and “The Man Child” are, as I have argued, stories about the crisis of reproducing raced masculinity whether by transfer of blood or property from father to son, “Going to Meet the Man” complicates this theme by depicting black and white men as intimately entwined in a destructive yet curiously productive paternal struggle, one that I will characterize as homo-productive. Creative if not precisely procreative, this nameless male coupling produces as the residue of its disturbing homoerotic union native sons who are, to redeploy one of Baldwin’s own identifications, “bastards of the West,” by which I mean to suggest that the role of the unwilling black man within the white paternal struggle continually goes unrecognized and disclaimed. In other words, I want to set alongside the literal, *hetero-reproductive* tradition of denied white fatherhood and black fatherhood both during and after slavery a parallel *homo-productive* tradition, figurative but no less real, of denied black and white paternal relations.

The catalyst for the plot of “Going to Meet the Man” is an episode of white male impotence. Jesse, a deputy sheriff, lies in bed staring at the “frail sanctuary” of his wife, Grace, unable to perform. And even though “[e]xcitement filled him just like a

toothache... it refused to enter his flesh” (198). In an attempt to cure himself of his sexual paralysis, Jesse conjures up the image of one of the many black women upon whom he has forced himself using the authority of his sheriff’s badge, but the memory “was more like pain; instead of forcing him to act, it made action impossible” (198).

What eventually makes action possible for Jesse is the recollection of two events, one from earlier that day and one from his childhood, both of which involve the violent eroticization of black men. In the first instance, Jesse has severely beaten a black prisoner, kicking him and shocking him with a cattle prod while simultaneously sexualizing him. Jesse remembers thinking, “*this ain’t no nigger, this is a goddamn bull*” (202) and then, in a surprising and frightening response to his stereotypical rendering of the “black stud,” becoming erect: “to his bewilderment, his horror, beneath his fingers, he felt himself violently stiffen—with no warning at all” (204). Yet Jesse seems only dimly aware that his violent enactments of power over the black man are deeply homoerotic. His recollection as he lies in bed hoping to reproduce that earlier erection is an apparently unconscious move: “‘What a funny time,’ he said, ‘to be thinking about a thing like that’” (201). Early in the story, then, Baldwin portrays Jesse as not fully able to connect his memories of erotic violations of the black man to his quest for arousal in bed with his wife.

But Jesse’s second memory, which stretches back to his boyhood on the day his parents take him to witness his first lynching, confirms that the first reflection was no mere coincidence. Jesse remembers his father lifting him onto his shoulders, as though to “carr[y] him through a mighty test” (217). From this position the young Jesse had watched as a man, who held a gleaming knife in one hand, “cradled” and “caressed” “the

nigger's privates" with the other (216). The exposed black penis, "the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest," was then cut away, and "the blood came roaring down." Having found suitable erotic stimuli in these memories, Jesse's body responds:

Something bubbled up in him, his nature again returned to him. He thought of the boy in the cell; he thought of the man in the fire; he thought of the knife and grabbed himself and stroked himself and a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl, came out of him and dragged his sleeping wife up on one elbow.... He thought of the morning and grabbed her.... (217-18)

Here Jesse undergoes a change, manifest in his ability to perform sexually, so that "Going to Meet the Man" ends with the successful completion of his heterosexual mission. But his vocal outburst, which I contend is an eruption of the subconscious Other, simultaneously disrupts that mission by revealing that Jesse is not quite "man enough" to get the job done alone. Thus dependent and divided, Jesse owes his nocturnal "success" neither wholly to himself nor to his wife but to the black men—including the protestor he had beaten earlier that day—who inhabit his waking dreams:

He thought of the morning and grabbed her, laughing and crying, crying and laughing, and he whispered, as he stroked her, as he took her, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger." (218)

The fascinating resolution to Jesse's failure to perform—the internalization and impersonation of the black man—encourages a revision of the traditional Freudian explanation of impotence, the "refusal of the executive organs of sexuality to carry out the sexual act..., although a strong psychological inclination to carry it out is present" ("On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," 179). Freud locates the source of male inhibition within the female sexual object whom the male in some way associates with his mother or sister. The male "sufferer" sometimes reports, according to

Freud, “that he has a feeling of an obstacle inside him, the sensation of a counter-will which successfully interferes with his conscious intention” (179). But Jesse’s sexual inabilities seem strikingly disconnected from female sex objects; neither his wife nor the black women who fail to arouse him appear precisely as unconscious sexual blocks.

Instead, white male impotence seems more closely associated with the black men who appear in Jesse’s nocturnal reveries not as sexual objects but as sexual accomplices or partners. Demonstrating the plasticity of male/male desire, Jesse does not fantasize about having sex *with* the black man so much as he desires to have sex *along with* or *as* the black man. In his discussion of internalization elsewhere in Baldwin, Lee Edelman writes that “Baldwin calls attention...to the complex exchange of inside and outside, self and other, that inheres in castration as the historic form in which white ‘racial’ hatred found its grotesquely distinctive expression” (65). Jesse’s plea to Grace, “love me just like you’d love a nigger,” thus maps forbidden heterosexual desire onto the white woman, but it does so primarily to secure and excuse the white man’s own homoerotic internalization of and dependence on his black male counterpart. The problem, in short, has little to do with Jesse’s choice of sexual object at all, and consequently, sexual object choice being one of the defining features of the hetero-/homosexual binary, repressed homosexuality becomes an imprecise interpretation of Jesse’s impotence; the libidinal dynamic at play in “Going to Meet the Man” is homoerotic without being traditionally homosexual. In Jesse’s case, the internalized black man does not act as obstacle or “counter-will” that blocks arousal, and instead the blockage is not found in the *presence* of the black man but, indeed, in his *absence*. The interference, contra Freud, is not located in a sexual object burdened with a surplus meaning leftover from the man’s

relationship with his mother or sister but rather in a psychic lack, a debilitating racial void.

Such voids have been widely interpreted as stemming from white male anxiety about inferior sexual capacities. Historian Winthrop D. Jordan notes that in white cultures the “concept of the Negro’s aggressive sexuality was reinforced by what was thought to be an anatomical peculiarity of the Negro male. He was said to possess an especially large penis” (82). White fascination with the black penis bore itself out, according to Jordan, in the birth of the white male’s growing sense of sexual inadequacy during the colonial slave-owning period: “[W]hite men anxious over their own sexual inadequacy were touched by a racking fear and jealousy. Perhaps the Negro better performed his nocturnal offices than the white man. Perhaps, indeed, the white man’s woman really wanted the Negro more than she wanted him” (80). Baldwin, of course, thoroughly recognized the black man’s status as “walking phallic symbol.” According to Trudier Harris, “James Baldwin has long argued that the prevailing metaphor for understanding the white man’s need to suppress the black man is that attached to sexual prowess...[T]he white man becomes a victim of his culture’s imagination,...acting out his fear of sexual competition from the black man” (20). I want to suggest, however, that perhaps the white man’s insecurity about penis size and sexual performance does not tell the whole story of his bedroom anxieties. Does another related worry perhaps stand behind these?

If the black man has been hypersexualized, he has also been portrayed as part of a hyperreproductive black coupling, “pumping out kids...every damn five minutes” in Jesse’s racist estimation (200). Significantly, Jesse and Grace are childless. But as the narrative ends and Jesse “labor[s] harder than he ever had before” (218), that labor seems

almost desperately procreative. Steven Weisenberger, characterizing “Going to Meet the Man” as a story about how “white supremacist terror reproduces itself,” thus argues that “this apparently childless, Negrophobic man will fulfill the destiny implied in his biblically significant name and, at this monstrous moment and in his white supremacist view, become the providentially understood ‘root’ of a racially ‘pure’ people” (12). In other words, at stake for Jesse on this night are both fatherhood and, inseparably, whiteness. Yet given the specifics of this “pregnant” moment, one wonders just how “pure” Jesse’s offspring will be. One wonders whether in fact the fantasized black man conjured up in the white man’s bed is imagined as bringing more than his erection, more than the endowment with which he has been burdened in the erotic imaginary.

What I want to suggest is that Jesse’s incorporation of the black man does not so much reflect masculine insecurity in terms of a *sexual* lack as it reveals the white man’s *paternal* paranoia. In other words, Jesse’s erotic fantasy is a wish constructed out of *paternal* desire, a father-wish. Furthermore, given that Grace, asleep beside her growling husband, operates on the periphery of this paternal struggle, the father-wish that binds together the sadistic white man and the black man of his tortured dreams is structured as a homoerotic fantasy, depending most fundamentally on male/male sexual union.<sup>3</sup> What, then, are the implications of the white man’s unwitting need to force the black man into the marital bed in order to reproduce and thereby secure his own paternal position?

One might begin to answer this question by noting how odd it is that the white marriage bed would be the site at which the black man is invested with paternal presence when he has traditionally been viewed either as an unwelcome perpetrator bent on violating white women or, more interestingly here, as a paternal *absence* in the *black* marriage bed.



From the famous Moynihan report of 1965 to the October 1995 Million Man March, the notion of the missing black father has become a cultural commonplace. Excessively sexual and reproductive yet insufficiently paternal, the black man is thus caught between two apparently contradictory stereotypes, one hypermasculine and the other emasculating. Deeply problematic as well, Jesse's incorporation of the black man into his father-wish plays out as a form of *enforced* paternity reminiscent of the reproductive uses to which slaves were once put, throwing into doubt the presence of the black *father* as opposed to the black *stud*.

The justifications, however, for suggesting that the black man is conjured as a strangely paternal presence in Jesse's father-wish are several. As I have argued, Jesse is not fully conscious of his reliance upon the black man's figurative participation in the white reproductive effort. Consequently, he cannot fully control the fantasy he evokes, as evidenced by the "terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl" (217) that erupts from him as he begins his father labor at the story's close. In fact, Jesse's manipulation of the black man's body in the prison cell stands in direct contrast to his powerlessness to fulfill his father-wish alone by manipulating his own body without fantasizing about the black man.

The homo-productive interracial union between men is, to be sure, a strikingly unbalanced affair in "Going to Meet the Man," as the torture of the black man becomes the erotic stimulus for the white man's heterosexual reproductive efforts. While Jesse clearly occupies the more visible position of power, however, the black man's role in the white man's paternal fantasy is crucial, even if we cannot attribute to the black man any volitional paternal agency. *As a requisite presence within the white man's paternal*

*fantasy*—that is, *as fantasy*—the black man plays a key reproductive role, for Jesse unwittingly creates out of the black man a fantasy father by invoking him as part of the racist paternal project of white reproduction. Even as a young boy at the lynching Jesse had been aware that the black man’s eroticized body would be “a great secret which would be the key to his life forever” (217). Yet the grown man does not know—cannot afford to know—the truth of that secret or the need that demands such secrecy. Jesse’s need stands in stark contrast to the needs of the black man in the jail cell, who even as a boy, Jesse suddenly recalls, had said to him, “I don’t want nothing you got, white man” (204). The irony of Jesse’s racist deployment of the black man within his father-wish is obvious. Jesse uses the black man to become reproductive, but the real goal of that act—to reproduce *whiteness*—is impossible due to the very methods of production, for to produce whiteness, Jesse incorporates blackness. The “truth” of that symbolic interracial union; the “possibility” of Jesse’s co-paternity; the “verity” of the ambiguously raced son that such fathers must produce...these are evidential hurdles that Baldwin can never surpass. Nevertheless, as I argued at the beginning of this essay, “Going to Meet the Man” insists, as Baldwin did relentlessly in his fiction and essays, that raced paternity is marked by precisely such impossible relations.

### **The Black Eunuch as Father: Against Feminization, Beyond Homosexuality**

Perhaps surprisingly, Jesse’s homoerotic paternal desires draws attention away from rather than toward the mythic black penis that has been central to the hypersexualization of black men. William Pinar argues that in the act of lynching, which he takes to be an “imprinting episode” of racial violence in America, “the black man’s phallus is the object

around which the sequence of desiring events is structured” (8). Diverting our eyes from the black penis would therefore seem to be especially difficult when discussing castration scenes that almost paradigmatically expose both that penis and the erotic racial energies that coalesce, mob-like, around it. Baldwin’s own display of the lynched man, as seen through the eyes of young Jesse, places the “the nigger’s privates” at the center of the racial violence. But “privates” are constituted by more than the penis, of course. Hidden behind the penis, quite literally, are the black man’s testicles, symbol of reproductive power and potency. Gary Taylor, in *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood*, exposes this interesting blindness:

The psychoanalytic reading of castration keeps insisting that we stare at the penis. But castration need have nothing to do with the penis. Freud’s theory (which Lacan recapitulates) would have us read “the lack of a penis” as a consequence of “castration.” But *castration does not necessarily or even normally remove the penis*. Castration—what medical dictionaries more precisely define as “bilateral orchiectomy”—is the removal of the testicles, not the penis. (52)

The black penis, it might be said, has eclipsed and even erased the black testes in castration narratives. My turn away from the penis may strike the student of racist castration as odd, for the focus on the white man’s castration of the black man has been almost solely on the penis (despite Baldwin’s use of “privates”). Consequently, physical inadequacy, as opposed to reproductive capacity, has stood as the point of contention. Whose is bigger, whose is better? But we might also ask, What has become of the testicles, the forgotten—or repressed—reproductive organs? The question of castration refocuses the issue, as I believe Baldwin does, on the issue of generation and paternity.

Although it would seem to signify an endpoint rather than reproductive possibility, castration, as I will discuss it here, participates in a narrative of reproduction. While it

provides the climax in the death ritual of lynching in “Going to Meet the Man,” cutting away the black man’s reproductive organs as part of the racist blood rite of lynching is a deeply layered act, one that attempts to enact a symbolic end within an end. Seen as an anti-reproductive measure rather than psycho-sexual retribution, castration becomes a death before death, figuratively killing the procreative black *father* just prior to the black’s *man*’s death. Castration, in this sense of a double endpoint, differs from many historical uses of castration, ones that exclusively sought to deny males the capacity to reproduce. Citing the eunuch as his prime example, Taylor reveals the *productive* uses to which castrated men have at times been put:

The English word *eunuch* derives from the ancient Greek word that is a compound of two other words, one meaning “bed,” especially “marriage bed” and the other meaning “to hold, keep guard.” Eunuchs were guardians of the marriage bed. They were qualified for that social function by being disqualified from a biological one. (33)

No longer reproductive themselves, eunuchs participated nonetheless in the reproductive efforts of husband and wife by watching over the marriage bed in order to maintain the propriety of the acts performed there. They conferred paternal confidence upon the husband, relieving him of the anxiety of uncertain paternity. In this sense, the eunuch was both reproductive endpoint *and* conduit for or guarantor of paternity. Positioned in such a way, the eunuch, though emasculated, could sometimes gain enormous patriarchal power, for “[a]lthough the power of eunuchs began in the bedchamber,” Taylor argues, “it soon extended to the rest of the palace, and then the rest of the empire” (38).

I want to suggest that the black man in Jesse’s waking dream/nightmare is transformed through castration into guardian of the white marriage bed. His reproductive incapacity bringing to fruition Jesse’s reproductive potential. But this move, ironically, expands

rather than eliminates the black man's reproductive powers within the white fantasy of racial reproduction. Jesse's father-wish does not, after all, require the presence of the stereotypical black "stud" who will serve as mere sexual proxy. Nor is the matter as simple as Jesse getting off by fantasizing about the tortured black male body. Rather, when Jesse conjures the beaten black prisoner who screams "*as the prod his testicles*" (my emphasis 202); when he remembers the *lynched* black man whose privates have been slashed away, the necessity of those recollections must be read within the context of Jesse's greatest fear: not that he is *sexually* inferior, nor even that he is *literally* impotent, but that he is *racially* impotent—unable to take his place within the racist tradition passed on by generations of white fathers through the creation of white sons.

Jesse restlessly ponders the race war he and the other white townsmen are fighting in terms of religious and social responsibility:

He tried to be a good person and treat everybody right: it wasn't his fault if the niggers had taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible for everyone to read!... He was only doing his duty: protecting white people from the niggers and the niggers from themselves. And there were still lots of good niggers around—he had to remember that.... They would thank him when this was over. (204-5)

Strikingly, Baldwin portrays the racist sheriff operating with a sense of moral agency, his principles deriving from the white supremacist tradition to which he blindly clings. Considering the "good niggers," Jesse smiles: "They hadn't all gone crazy. This trouble would pass" (205). But despite such attempts to comfort himself, Jesse darkly realizes that "[e]ach day, each night, he felt worn out, aching, with their smell in his nostrils and filling his lungs, as though he were drowning—drowning in niggers; and it was all to be done again when he awoke. It would never end." He fears that the struggle to maintain

the ways of the past is already lost. His role models, “[m]en much older than he, who had been responsible for law and order much longer than he, were now much quieter than they had been.” And among his friends, Jesse feels that “they had lost, probably forever, their old and easy connection with each other. They were forced to depend on each other more and, at the same time, to trust each other less” (207). When Joel Williamson remarks in his groundbreaking book, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, upon the “racial dream world [that Whites]...fought tenaciously to preserve (112), he describes the past to which Jesse tries to cling and the future he so desperately hopes to recreate.

Jesse therefore imagines—*must* imagine—in his bed a figure that will ensure the success of his racially reproductive labors: the black eunuch. Rather than acting as the guardian of female chastity (which would be another ironic role for him), the black eunuch, a figment of the white racist imagination and central to Jesse’s father-wish, guards against the white man’s failure to engage in the reproductive act that is meant to, above all, produce whiteness. He confers masculine confidence and paternal potential.

An even greater irony is that, ultimately, the black eunuch is repaid for this function by being re-masculated, positioned in the role of progenitor. Jesse, having been aroused by the memories of the *castrated* black man, goes on to impersonate the *fully-functional* black man in the act of sex: “I’m going to do you like a nigger.” As the black man is remade, made whole again both in and as the white man’s body, castration gets translated into procreation. The black man, no longer merely a servant to Jesse’s paternal fantasy, takes a privileged place in the white father’s bed, his power extending unseen into the kingdom of white patriarchy.

It is important to note that the primarily male reproductive effort seen in “Going to Meet the Man” refuses to rely upon a feminization or sex change for its logical resolution. And this is true even when considering the act of castration that brings the men together. Robyn Wiegman notes that frequently “empowerment based on maleness is...quite violently deferred”: “[f]or the black male, who occupies an empowered ‘masculine’ and disempowered ‘racial’ positioning, this deferral has often taken the form of explicit feminizations in the disciplinary activity of castration that has accompanied lynching,” (12). Wiegman continues, however, by suggesting that the feminization of the black man has become something of a critical shortcut. She points to the “masculine sameness” that “governs the black man’s contradictory position in the cultural symbolic and underlies the various representational attempts to align him with the feminine.” Rather than “exchang[e] potential claims for patriarchal inclusion for a structurally passive or literally castrated realm of sexual objectification and denigration” (14), Wiegman implicitly challenges readers of raced masculinity to create interpretative strategies that hold open the possibility of black masculinity within castration narratives without deferring to the feminine position (or, likewise, to myth of the black stud) for explanation.

In the context of raced father struggles, in “Going to Meet the Man,” the castration of the black man is mocked by the recuperation of the black eunuch into the father-labor of reproduction. In fact, Jesse’s fantasy of white fatherhood depends on the presence of the regenerated eunuch, the black male “father.” In recasting the black man as participant in the procreative act along with the white man, Baldwin forces a reconsideration of how race is produced, for the focus on paternal doubling in Jesse—it takes both the black and

white man to create the white father—maintains sex sameness despite racial difference, thereby resisting heteronormative closure. Therefore, following Wiegman, rather than regendering or resexing the black man (or the white man) in accordance with the heteronormative paradigm of biological procreation, one might rather follow a homo-cognitive practice, one that maintains a focus on sameness and the tensions it creates and that effectively—and it seems to me more simply—revises the use of the normative reproduction metaphor to include two men operating *as men* in a disturbing paternal coupling. In other words, rather than interpreting the multiple and multi-directed emasculations driven by race within a frame of binary gender difference, it is possible to posit the existence of two *men* bound together in the act of racial production. Susan Gubar’s understanding of the black man positioned as a “penis-not-a-phallus,” which is one way of theorizing multiple masculinities, might thus be expanded when considering raced paternity; when he occupies the role of invisible progenitor in the white man’s bed, the black man edges toward a homo-productive role from which he can less easily be recuperated into a heteronormative narrative. In this way, the homoerotic refuses to be subsumed within the logic of the heteronormative, enabling a re-evaluation of the product of the violent male/male union.

At stake in this discussion—or one of the stakes—is the possibility of refiguring black/white male castration narratives beyond the norm of homosexuality, the field upon which interracial masculinities have lately been contested. This has become particularly true in the critical literature that frequently interprets the castrating impulse as nearly synonymous with homosexual desire. For Pinar, lynching expresses the white man’s



“repressed, racialized homosexual desire.” “Lynching was,” he concludes, “in no small measure a mangled form of queer sex” (11).

The promise of, as well as the problem with, such a “homosexualizing” reading of racist castration is that no clear threshold for determining sexuality exists. Just how “mangled” can sex be and still be considered sex? Of particular relevance here, has gay critical theory reached the point at which “homosexuality” must be considered an endpoint or an explanation rather than a conduit for interpretation? Certainly Pinar ventures a gross generalization in arguing that white lynchers were repressed homosexuals and, furthermore, that these men wanted to occupy the position of the female as part of their homosexuality. I have already argued against the necessity of imposing a gender-switch on homoerotic relations generally and on Jesse’s desire for the black man in particular, especially as such a reading participates in the often unquestioned practice, even within gay studies and queer theory, of heteronormative narrativization. In any case, Jesse at no time seeks out the feminine position vis-à-vis the black man, nor does he place the black man in that role. Instead, Jesse desperately constructs a volatile reproductive space in which he identifies with the black man, thereby resisting a male/female duality. Rather than reading strongly *against* the characterization of lynching as a fundamentally homosexual act of aggression, though, I hope to read *through* or *past* homosexuality by setting the stakes of the male struggle in terms of homo-productivity. The importance of framing interracial male relations in the context of paternal struggle must be understood as part of a move beyond representations of those relations as implicitly sexual/homosexual.

As space opens up for imagining a model of homo-productive male relations, such two-father stories offer a loophole for reading interracial male/male “marriages.” Norman Mailer’s hipster or “white negro,” helpfully characterized by Gubar as the “proleptic offspring of...interracial fraternity” and a “figure of the Not-Yet-Born out of male-bonding,” becomes in Baldwin not pale symbol of a cultural love child produced by the white bohemian’s and juvenile delinquent’s ménage-a-trois with the Negro but rather the white-skinned child born of woman but *produced* by two men in a struggle for racial posterity—read purity—that is inevitably undercut by the very fact of the men’s interracial union.

### **“The Strange Meaning of Being White”**

If, as I have claimed, black/white male relations in “Going to Meet the Man” become homo-productive, what is the product? Although Jesse’s incorporation of the black man seems ripe with procreative potential, Baldwin does not expressly show the fruits of that labor. So who and where is this child of male miscegenation, and in what sense is he—again, the product is always a son in Baldwin—“real”? Unlike his corporeal alter ego—the mulatto child produced by the white man/master who denies him and the black woman/slave who is denied him—the biracial son of the unwitting white man and the unwilling black man does not figure in the American story of mixed-race at all. He is clearly not a “biological fact.” But racial identity in America has never been as simple as biological facts. Biology has been at times ignored in constructions of race (as when it was superceded by the legal discourse of ownership) and at times trotted out as the very science of race (as in the pseudo-scientific discourse of the “one-drop rule”). And though

a woman literalizes and gives body to the child produced by two men, her biological role does not, as I have argued, necessarily position her alongside the child's fathers. Standing, as Spillers surmised, "in the flesh," she becomes *only* flesh, taking on the role of surrogate and carrying a child she must ultimately give up to his fathers in a demonstration of the misogyny that grounds paternity throughout *Going to Meet the Man*. The mother therefore occupies a fascinating liminal position—the transfer point between the literal and the figurative, between reproduction and production, between man and race man. Jesse's paternal fantasy, in its psychic incorporation of the brutalized black male body and its physical transfer of that fantasy onto the body of the white woman powerfully condenses racist and sexist ontologies into a single subject position.

Where, then, the "white negro?" At first glance we seem not to notice the offspring of interracial fatherhood because his hetero-reproductive parents are "white" and his own pale flesh and blond hair avoid racial scrutiny. Yet, unlike the relentless scrutiny that sought in the minute details of skin color and hair texture evidence of an invisible blackness against which "true" whiteness would quite literally pale by comparison, Baldwin refuses to locate race fears in the flesh. While the overwhelming anxiety of many "white" Americans was, as sociologist Charles S. Johnson predicted, "a time when men would 'ask for the Negroes' and be told, 'There they go, clad in white men's skins'" (291), Baldwin insists that the real fear, the fear which cannot be quelled, lies in the realization that race is metaphor and thus cannot be located. The fear and the truth for Baldwin, once again, is that "white people are not white: part of the price of the white ticket is to delude themselves into believing that they are.... America is not, and never

can be, white” (*Price*, xiv). The strange meaning of being white in *Going to Meet the Man*, its unreality or metaphorization, is that whiteness cannot be reproduced.

Ultimately, Baldwin envisions in *Going to Meet the Man* an unsustainable racial landscape in which generations of what might be called “race orphans” are born of a white father dependent on the presence of the black paternal Other. The state of racelessness—what Faulkner called “the most tragic condition that an individual can have”—becomes in Baldwin the unspoken and indeed disclaimed American condition in general. That denial has behind it not only a race preservationist mentality but also the weight of heteronormative conceptions of racial production that overlook the potential for interracial male fatherhood. Dual paternity—the new American race relation revealed in *Going to Meet the Man*—becomes visible, though, once castration is viewed as a wedge for reading male homoeroticism as productive of racelessness as opposed to race. If *kes*, the Indo-European root of castration, means not only “to cut” but also “to cut off from,” castration in America takes on the double meaning of physically mutilating the black man and, simultaneously, cutting off the white man from his own race, invisibly cleaving whiteness from itself. As part of castration narratives we must scrutinize the fractures within, and therefore the meaninglessness of, “whiteness.”

I return, now, to “The Man Child,” the only all-white story other than *Giovanni’s Room* in Baldwin’s oeuvre, reiterating my earlier question, Why does Jamie kill little Eric? I propose that in “whitewashing” “The Man Child,” Baldwin creates an *allegory of whiteness* that represents precisely the race lesson that Jesse in “Going to Meet the Man” cannot bear to learn, for it prophesies his darkest nightmare: the death of race.

Baldwin insists that Jesse's race war is lost—has always been lost—by constructing young Eric from "The Man Child" as the double to the young Jesse found in the lynching flashback in "Going to Meet the Man." The parallels drawn between the boys are many: both rest their heads in the laps of their mothers and then, later, ride on their fathers' shoulders into manhood, whether at the lynching or across the family fields; both stare for a brief and terrifying moment into the eyes of death—Jesse looks into the lynched man's, though "it could not have been as long a second... it seemed longer than a year (216), while Eric looks into Jamie's, "eyes which no one had ever looked into" (62); both beg for life—Jesse, now grown, cries to his wife to "love me just like you'd love a nigger" in, as I have argued, an implicitly procreative fantasy, just as Eric begs for new life as Jamie's little boy. Given these similarities, Eric's fate becomes a window onto Jesse's own: there will be no white heir to take Jesse's place, not because Jesse cannot reproduce but because the product of his paternal union with the fantasized black man cannot be white.

To approach from the other direction, Jesse's internalization of the black man-turned-father reiterates the theme of invisible paternity in the collection and thus helps to unmask Jamie, the shadow father in "The Man Child," as the race traitor who commits racial infanticide. The allegory of the doomed white son, Eric, therefore plays out the race nightmare—an end to the raced order of things—that terrifies Jesse. Within the whitewashed world that seems to celebrate the man child, there exists a symbolic figure of racial peril, one that invisibly infiltrates and disrupts the endless white lineage through a rejection of white land, and most dramatically, the white son. "This land will belong to no one," Jamie's final decree, echoes the rejection of whiteness offered in "Going to

Meet the Man”: “You ain’t got nothing I want, white man.” Eric’s death intimates not Jesse’s own end but rather takes on mythic proportions as the death of the last White Son so that Jesse is positioned as racial endpoint. Playing out the allegory of whiteness, Jesse stands at the end of white generation and generations, the last heir to a whiteness he cannot pass on. The allegory of whiteness Baldwin creates is in fact an allegory of lost whiteness.

“In America we still live with the paradox that white is black,” writes Joel Williamson. “Occasionally people who are visibly white declare themselves black, and millions of Americans who are more European than African in their heritage insist, sometimes defiantly, upon their blackness. Our paradox is unique,” he concludes (2). The kind of racechange Williamson points to, the claim to blackness by white-skinned people, is bolstered by the discourse of “heritage” and “descent” that seems to signify “real” racial identity. The racechange I have traced in Baldwin is even more paradoxical, for the claims to invisible blackness I make here have no such legitimizing, hetero-reproductive discourse to fall back on. Reading “The Man Child” as a type of neo-passing narrative requires a drastic reorientation in thinking about how race is produced. John Brenkman, in an extended critique of Freud’s Oedipus complex, suggests that such striking revisions of heteronormative origin stories are available:

“Where do I come from?” inevitably gets answered *from this woman*, but the answer never exhausts the question. One’s genesis is multiple not unitary.... One’s own birth is at once fact and metaphor, singular event and cluster of meanings. It is therefore not, as Freud first suggests, “an event that is not open to any doubt and cannot be repeated.” The revisions of the question *where do I come from?* can easily contradict one another or take shape around completely different desires or anxieties. (22)

The anxiety surrounding the preservation of race in “The Rockpile,” “The Man Child,” and “Going to Meet the Man” revises the hetero-reproductive question, *where do I come from*, by answering, *from these two men*.

Reading *Going to Meet the Man* as a neo-passing narrative in which homo-productive interracial male union produces racially ambiguous sons requires, suddenly, that we re-evaluate *all* “white” children, tracing their parentage back to their multiple fathers as well as their mothers and fathers. This approach moves race off the skin and out of the blood where it has so long been located and effectively redraws the hetero-reproductive, pseudo-biological “race map” to take into account the possibilities of homo-productivity. Ironically, in that raceless sons are the result, Baldwin’s homo-productive male relations in *Going to Meet the Man* are *destructive* of race. “Blackness” becomes “invisible” in such passing narratives not due to the dilution of skin color from dark to light but because skin color can never tell the tale of impossible paternity; the black “father” within the white father is always invisible. However, his invisibility should not be taken as an absence but rather the very mark of his potency, for being located nowhere along the white family tree he is suddenly everywhere. Whiteness itself then becomes the mark of questionable paternity in that only *whiteness* might have necessitated the reproductive aid of the black eunuch. The child of the white male paternal fantasy is so unimpeachably white that *every* “white” son becomes, potentially, mulatto just as *every* child under slavery was, potentially, fathered by the white master. The originary act of homo-productivity therefore becomes not only akin to but indeed the ideal metaphor for hetero-reproductive interracial union in its power to produce utter “confusions of consanguinity.” It is the ideal metaphor for the great American “race sin” of

miscegenation, and its product, the “white negro” son, is symbol of the great American fear: racial ambiguity and indeed racelessness.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>As a practical measure and unless otherwise noted, I will use the title of the entire collection, *Going to Meet the Man*, to reference the three stories exclusively under consideration here.

<sup>2</sup>“The Rockpile” was probably written in the late 1940s but was unpublished prior to the 1965 collection.

<sup>3</sup> In *Between Men*, Sedgwick reminds her readers that “the status of women, and the whole question of arrangements between genders, is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women—even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships” (25). In turning my attention away from women, especially in discussions of reproduction that require female bodies and thus demand feminist analysis, I have had to willfully and sometimes skeptically set aside Sedgwick’s well-reasoned advice. I do this for several reasons: first, I take as a premise that white paternal privilege is built upon the bodies of women, but my chief argument lies elsewhere. Indeed, it is precisely my argument that the notion of “reproduction” fixes our attention, unthinkingly, on the male/female couple. I mean to expose the critical blindness that itself reproduces that privileged biological duo as central to the reproduction of race, as though race were biologically reproduced. In short, the very requirement of the female to narratives of reproduction—and to critical narratives of men together a la Sedgwick—itself promotes a kind of forgetfulness: that race is constructed rather than born. That we accept as “fact” the idea that the circumstances of racial construction “demand,” first and foremost, biological reproduction, i.e., a newborn body, suggests the degree to which we continue to look to, to look in, the body for “race.”

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