

Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature

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First Edition

To the memory of
Willanna Courtney Pope Wells—
the composite woman—
and to that of Rosalie,
the child/mother

R.P.B.

To Mother Thelma
For whipping some
sense in me with
her love

B.J.P.

In memory of
Grandmother,
Granddaddy,
Aunt Pearl,
Uncle Willie,
and
Cleone

B.G.-S.

and eclecticism; of Ed Leek's double vision; of Gloria Joseph's and Gail Hansberry's mellow intrusions into delicate unstaged moments. The photographs are worth millions of words—they elicit much more than verbal response.

Among the illustrators, Richard Powell is a beacon. His careful and spiritual artistic development, beginning somewhere on Martin Luther King Drive in Chicago, continuing at Morehouse College, Howard University, the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum, and now, Norfolk State College, is exhibited here. Already a master of detail in his youth, Mr. Powell is especially adept at capturing the versatility evident in black female forms. Leo Carty utilizes a different sensuality and maturity in his drawings. From his early work, such as the 1964 *Freedomways* drawing, "Women at the Well" (and featured in *Sturdy Black Bridges*), to the two most recent ones which depict a moving, aware Caribbean female experience, touched by a black past, present, and future, Carty is consistently able to summon that inner world which profound artists have—to do their bidding.

Finally, there are the three bibliographies—gold mines for scholars in African-American, African, and Caribbean studies—paths that lead to others. This book was originally designed for scholar and layman. The inclusion of the inexhaustive though impressive bibliographies proves that the original intention was a serious one come to fruition.

Sturdy Black Bridges is already a classic.

Gloria Gayles
Talladega College
Talladega, Alabama

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Intensely flammable and articulate, James Baldwin was for years *the* Black writer in the United States. He attained that dubious status by converting the psychic wounds he suffered during childhood and adolescence into powerful and aesthetically impressive art. A brilliant essayist, novelist, dramatist, and lecturer, Baldwin, who resides most of the time in Paris, but who has declared his intentions to return to the United States to live, has been "an honest man and a good writer," a goal he first stated in 1955.

Baldwin's titles, outside scores of reviews, articles, and stories, include *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, *No Name in the Street*, *The Fire Next Time*, *Giovanni's Room*, *The Amen Corner*, *Another Country*, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, *Nothing Personal*, *Going to Meet the Man*, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *A Rap on Race* (with Margaret Mead), *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *The Devil Finds Work*.

If Beale Street Could Talk is the corpus from which Hortense Spillers makes her thesis—about Baldwin, about Tish and the other female characters in the novel, vis-à-vis the males, and about the power of language and myth in and out of the homiletic mode.

The Politics of Intimacy: *A Discussion*

by HORTENSE SPILLERS

This essay is an attempt to suggest a working model for a literary analysis of issues specifically related to the intimate life of Afro-American women. I suggest literary criticism as a model because its rhetorical resources, at best, reveal both semantic and poetic meaning. As I see it, the debate that women engage requires both the spare-bone sharpness of systematic thinking and the compassionate grasp of issues which define men and women as human sympathetic endeavor. In short, I'm trying to enter an already established conversation, offering a few basic suggestions: (1) that

literary criticism, not the only, or even pre-eminent, instrument at our disposal, gives us a clue to the text of our own experience and (2) that the "politics of intimacy" can recover its lost ground only when we understand that its present diction is demonstrably outmoded; we need new notations for our time.

Definition cannot be avoided, and I know that "politics" and "intimacy" pose a sharp contradiction. The stipulated term brings together extremes of human purpose and function, but the combination suggests itself because it reverberates the elements of both power and compassion which cluster around relationships. As I use it, I mean primarily the intricate fabric of feeling drawn out in fictional situations between men and women. By focusing on its grammar, we may discover more precisely how woman-freedom, or its negation, is tied to the assertions of myth, or ways of saying things.

The grammar of fictional situations is the easiest one to manipulate because the characters are beyond change or corruption. They are free. They stay still. They contain a contradiction more readily than we do because their lips are not their own, but these unchanging characters may ultimately yield up some bright secret about our own dynamic experience. I choose Baldwin as an example because he offers a landscape of black characters in powerful intimate situations, but more than that, he is the culmination of a tradition of language whose roots are histrionic and religious. We need to watch the ways of its charm: That it rehearses a rhetoric of "received opinion" is both its danger and its apparent timelessness. I also intend to follow a hidden theme in certain fiction, particularly Baldwin's, which suggests that repetition (dramaturgic and rhetorical) breeds anticipation.

Fictional character is the upshot of certain formalistic and thematic strategies aligned in final ways. If the strategies are shifted around, then character changes decisively. That observation alone is nothing new. In fact, we can even look forward to it as a leading proposition of the woman critic's vigil of male writers, but my deeper point is to try to demonstrate the impact of the grammar of male and female relationships as the crucial component of the "politics of intimacy." A contract is implicit; the partners either share power or engage a hierarchy of motives, but relationships, whether they end or not, have an outcome—thus the

motive of power. To say that relationship boils down to nothing but the assumptions which operate behind the façade of language is to be reductionistic, perhaps, but it is clear that the terms of relationship, even in fictive situations, are historically based and lend their characters an attitude, more or less suitable to them. In other words, once it is clear how fictive situations may pursue a locking of female and male destiny, then it will be clearer, perhaps, how everyday language and its situation create an attitude of containment or liberation.

Perhaps it can be fairly argued that all myth, specifically its translation into notions of social hierarchy and political status, is concealed in eternal valuation. So robbed of their historical detail, men and women in intimate situations appear wild and colorful: man against woman, the battle of the sexes; try as we will, it is not always so easy to avoid these configurations of thought, and I must admit a certain profound pleasure in entertaining this dream of history. Indeed, we could go so far as to say that a certain quality of mental and imaginative life is inconceivable without the dreaming, mythic mind, but reality intrudes on myth and seeks to plunder it. The burden of consciousness appears to be the negotiation between myth and reality.

The "exotic" engenders no such negotiation and like an eternity, which it imitates, is the same, everywhere, for all time. "Heritage," one of the Countee Cullen's poems from the 1920s,¹ embodies the Exotic Ideal in U.S. poetry. The world view out of which the poem is made has no live notion of "Africa" as a continuous series of cultural movements, but has it as symbolism, a status which can be achieved, not unlike the Calvinist Heaven, by blessed election. The subject becomes, as a result, an essence whose mystery is inherent. "Feminine mystique," "feminine intuition," "male logic," "strong black woman" belong to this category of a historical notation.

Baldwin's long-suffering females show this symbolic value as a consistent thematic feature of the writer's career from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Not unique among American writers in this respect, Baldwin is certainly the most eloquent. His women characters usually occupy a central place in his fiction, and as tragic heroines, their foretaste of disaster gives them a dignity and largeness of movement which outsize life. The

weight of lamentation falls most strikingly on them because they have no language relevant to their specific condition, generating humor, variety, and above all, personal moral choice. Florence Grimes, the sister of Baldwin's preacher in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is a child of Mother Legend, expanding the tale of Emancipation to its northern border. Proud and brooding, Florence comes North, haunted by ancient enmities, her own sickness unto death. When she confronts the altar on the night of the saints, tears coming down like "burning rain," she stands in fear of death and pride of heart. Serpent-eyed death teases her: "God's got your number, knows where you live, death's got a warrant out for you."² As appealing as this Old Testament drama may be, the reader wants Florence to be rid of her demons. Against serpent-eyed death, tears won't do. True to the logic of interdiction and divine justice, Florence will be sacrificed. Gabriel Grimes's wife, Elizabeth, is kin to Florence in her pride and trouble. Also the tale of an odyssey from South to North, Elizabeth's plot line bears the specter of father-riddle—abandonment and unfulfilled love. As pitiless as a stone, gripped by erratic fears, Grimes has only compounded Elizabeth's grief.

With none of the ferocious dignity of Florence, nor the slow halting sadness of Elizabeth, nor yet the strange atavistic mournfulness of Deborah (Gabriel's first wife and God's Holy Fool), Esther is Gabriel's third victim—his illicit lover with whom he has a foredoomed son, Royal. However, Esther is a breath of fresh air in her boldness and charm. A man's woman—sensuous, short-skirted, and teasing—Esther and her mother belong to the swinging, the foxy, and the ruined, and Gabriel is her downfall.

This sketchy summary of Baldwin's women, in what is, perhaps, his finest fiction, reminds us not only of the terms of his statement but also of the moral universe to which he addresses himself. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, though set in Harlem, occurs outside a specific time and place. As allegory, the entangling takes work well, for all the characters move along a spiritual trajectory whose material correspondence goes from the valleys and back roads of the South to the light of the Northern Temple of the Fire Baptized. In this context, unspeakable suffering is an instrument of enlightenment rather than a brutal or maudlin contrivance of

"facts." Baldwin's social facts are only shadows of an infinite reality.

Baldwin's characters, especially his women, are rammed through the try-works too often for us to believe that their world is anything other than an extension of Heaven and Hell. They are so close to fire and brimstone that all they have to do is roll over, go right on to heaven without dying. They need not earn their death, since their time and eternity coexist. We therefore regard their suffering, male-originated, as another instance of God-mischief. What have they done to be so black and blue? We don't know. We're not told, and being able to make no sense of it, we can only grieve for their absurdity or tragedy.

The pattern of female suffering in the novel has its counterpart in the tale of Juanita of *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Richard's lover and a potential liaison of both Meridian Henry (Richard's preacher father) and Parnell James (liberal white editor of the Mississippi newspaper), Juanita represents, we can safely assume, women loyalty. In love with Richard for all time, Juanita is willing to bear any burden as her testimony would have it. On the witness stand, as Lyle Britten is brought to trial for the murder of Richard, she thinks:

. . . Mama is afraid I'm pregnant.
Mama is afraid of so much. I'm not
afraid. I hope I'm pregnant. I
hope I am! One more illegitimate
black baby—that's right, you
jive mothers! And I'm going to
raise my baby to be a man. A
man, you dig? (Baldwin) Oh, let
me be pregnant, let me be preg-
nant, don't let it all be gone!³

Right before this, Juanita recalls the last time that she and Richard made love:

. . . My God. His chest, his belly,
the rising, the falling, the moans.
How he clung, how he struggled—

life and death! Why did it all seem to me like tears? That he came to me, clung to me, plunged into me, howling and bleeding, somewhere inside his chest, his belly, and it all came out, came pouring out, like tears. My God, the smell, the touch, the taste, the sound, of anguish.⁴

This grim lyricism is the victim's voice, left with its pain and what it anticipates for the future. Is it possible for a black woman to assert another kind of consciousness? The question is relevant if we are looking for responsive strategies to any new historical situation, specifically, the woman as a stranger in urban/industrial experience without man or father to define her. We could put the question another way: What are the terms of definition for women outside the traditional hierarchies? Is female status negated without a male-defining principle?

Two important elements are opposed in the question, and Baldwin's *Beale Street* embodies both in the love story of Clementine Rivers and Alonzo Hunt. It is clear that the opposition between obedience and liberty is the crucial thematic component of this tale, and it is precisely this opposition which women seek to restore as a dialectical notion. In *Beale Street*, obedience (female) and liberty (male) are irreconcilable opposites in this family drama set in modern Harlem.

Baldwin's metaphor for young Afro-American manhood, Fonny Hunt, is ingenious and imaginative; his plot line reflects the urban experience of black males like himself. His encounter with a white cop leads to his arrest for the alleged rape of a Puerto Rican woman. Fonny is framed by Officer Bell for reasons which are historically and psychologically profound—white male lust for black flesh. Ostensibly, Fonny is thrown in jail because he defends Tish against the sexual advances of an Italian thug on the streets of the Village; not only does Fonny successfully defend Tish against her assailant, but he is also defended in the process by an Italian woman (the owner of the vegetable stand where Tish is shopping), who has witnessed the incident and speaks up in

Fonny's behalf. Officer Bell, the aggregate white cop and the defender of white America's doubtful virtues, is mad in the deepest springs of his emotions. Because he is in trouble, Tish and Fonny are endangered. This is the central story of *Beale Street*, predicated on the American myth of race, and from it unfolds the moving love story of Tish and Fonny, the children of the Hunt and Rivers clans, who endure their separation with heroic love and honor.

Baldwin's themes are familiar, and we've encountered them time and again in his essays and the two works already mentioned here. The unspeakable cruelty of white men is his *cause célèbre*, and in its name infinite horrors are committed. "Uptown" would not be what it is without the awful white menace. To it are conjoined the heroic qualities of black men, their love and honor in the face of terror, but together these contrapuntal forces engender a world essentially joyless, one group living in perpetual and numbing fear of the other. Why and how the promise of new life under these conditions breeds rejoicing strikes this reader as perverse sentimentality. Tish is pregnant (as Juanita of *Blues* hopes she is), Fonny is in jail, Frank Rivers, Fonny's father, will kill himself by carbon-monoxide poisoning, and the woman who can save Fonny, Victoria Alvarez, is hiding out, hysterical, in the mountains of San Juan. Fonny did not rape her; everybody knows it, but Victoria is too confused and terrified to reconsider her allegations, yet, despite all this, the novel ends in diapason celebration:

. . . You see Fonny today? (Sharon)

Yes. (Tish)

And how was he?

He's beautiful. They beat him up,
but they didn't beat him. He's
beautiful . . . Fonny is working on the
wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling.
And from far away, but coming nearer,
the baby cries and cries and cries
and cries and cries and cries and
cries and cries and cries like it
means to wake the dead.⁶

We appreciate, perhaps, the irony of Baldwin's closure as a believable imitation of life rhythm, but the situations of the novel are suspect primarily because the moral obligation of racial continuity devolves on the women. This is not a tragedy, if the women choose it as their "program of action," but the novel, as I read it, poses the problem of choice as one of fate—a locking of destiny wherein the females are doomed to play out time and again the fated conclusiveness of their peculiar emotional temperament—to yield to their love for men—and its inevitable biological destiny, to have children, despite hell.

Because Baldwin has toned down his grammar—exuberant metaphors, biblical allusions, impacted sentences, and the evocation of powerful natural forces—black church ritual and its telluric drama of weeping, moaning, praying saints recede in significance. Since the tale has been removed from out the center of the Eye of God, the novel follows a less convoluted design than *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Tish's narrative style is, therefore, an easy, graceful informality of tone, and she is charming, generous, and slow to anger with her antagonists, but her acceptance of the terms of obedience (patience, waiting, living for her man) is reminiscent of the Old World sorrow tales of Florence and Elizabeth.

Love in the novel is achieved variously: Tish and Fonny as sexual partners; Sharon and Joseph Rivers as parent-lovers; Ernestine and Tish as sister-lovers; Joseph and Frank as brother-lovers; Frank and Fonny as father and son reconciled. Love within this circle is sufficient to its own ends, and the novel suggests that continuity, or the passion for survival, is most probable under conditions of courage. This is all very nice, but the love between man and woman here is predicated on the surrender of the female's imagination. Baldwin, interestingly enough, puts the words in Tish's mouth:

He [Fonny] was a stranger to me, but joined. I had never seen him with other men. I had never seen the love and respect that men can have for each other . . . It can be a very great revelation. And, in this fucked up time and place, many women, perhaps most women, feel, in this warmth and energy, a threat.⁶

About a quarter of the way through the text, this passage is central to the novel's logic and order. We would do well to brood over it, for it also contains more than one element crucial to Baldwin's metaphysics. We cannot miss the high moral seriousness of the passage which resembles the essay in its claim to truth. Suddenly, we're in the midst of a righteous divination from the controlling drama with Tish as something of a mountebank. Tish will not be this "sensible" and high-toned again. In fact, we are not used to this kind of penetration from her, since, in a few pages, she will relinquish this delicious understanding in a put-down of Fonny's mother and sisters. This elevated vision, not of her own doing, we suspect, is Baldwin usurping her role in order to re-enforce his moral point. Its careful elaboration has its complement elsewhere, particularly *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time*.

The word "stranger" has an interesting echo here in calling up what we imagine to be the historical alienation between men and women, but note that the burden of sensation falls on Tish—*she* senses his strangeness to her as though he is some half-fabulous creature from another world whose essence is eternally concealed from her eyes. The rest of the passage supports the mystery. The "love and respect" that men "can have for each other" is somehow quite different from the passion between the sexes and, perhaps, more desirable in its "warmth and energy." It seems to me that this desirable thing, from which women are excluded by virtue of natural law, should not be threatening, but a matter of envy, a goal to be attained, woman to woman. To see it as threat is to evaluate it through male eyes, since the proposition assumes that women don't have it and experience, therefore, an absence or lack of genuine camaraderie. But note: It is only because the "time and place" are "fucked up" that women perceive "love and respect" among men as a threatening thing. It is just possible that disorder is a human product and has something to do with a man's insistence that he is a "stranger" to a woman and she, therefore, eternally "the other."

This brotherhood which Baldwin perceives has its own language, its singular idiom, which women can neither manipulate nor even decipher. According to Tish, maleness is a hieroglyph of experience, based on nothing more concrete than the accident of

birth. This is not unlike a Calvinist election in which case only God knows why some are more equal than others, and its mysterious celebration reverberates racial dogma where white is simply right. One is more than others just because.

Whether or not men can grow up without women is quite beside the point. In our time, they usually don't (and vice versa). Under special historical circumstances—wars, migration movements spurred by unemployment when both men and women tend to move singly or in packs, or under special sociohistorical arrangements like monasteries and abbeys—the sexes may undergo temporary isolation from each other, but otherwise, men and women are neighbors, both subject to mutability and death. If Baldwin means that men and women grow up knowing or anticipating quite different experience, then we can vouch for him, since they clearly inherit “received opinion” radically different from each other in its thrust and emphasis. An aspect of woman legacy is: “You’re a girl. You can’t do what your brothers do,” and this is later conjoined with sentiments like Tish’s: Men are strangers.

“Mystery and terror” are quite appropriate to the figure of thought that Tish outlines, since both terms speak, by implication, to issues which are older than a modernist vocabulary. “Bottomless terror,” the woman’s archetypal nightmare of male manipulation or rejection, belongs to this category of nighttime things. It is precisely the nighttime of the human race that “bottomless terror” belongs to because it is irrational and profoundly concealed. But “terror” is an important word for Baldwin, even seminal and ubiquitous, from the awful dread of John Grimes in the face of his father’s divine wrath to the sorrow of Jaime, one of Baldwin’s Puerto Rican characters in *Beale Street*. Jaime’s “terror” is unutterable,” just as “terror” in Baldwin, in line with his metaphysics, is always unutterable. In fact, I cannot think of a single character, male or female, in Baldwin’s works, who has been freed from these Awful Unspeakabilities. That the latter are rarely specified relegates them to a Heideggerian category of primordial dread, and the characters’ most persistently remarkable feature is their inability to speak their trouble, but in a Manichean order, personality is immersed in chaos, a dark sweltering density of confusion where the same nightmare keeps repeating itself, time and time again. Since action is predicated on the chaos of experience, then

character is stalled in a preconscious intent where John may as well be Dick or Tom, swimming around in the nightmare of the race. On this level, the sexes, ironically enough, are equal—both confused, both benighted.

Fonny, however, has been given intelligence, even art, and purpose: He is Baldwin's sculptor, spending long hours fashioning objects of art from wood. For Tish, this "other life" of Fonny's is his defining passion. At what will be their loft back in the Village, Tish recounts this scene:

. . . he moved away from me; his heavy hands seemed to be attempting to shape the air—"I live with wood and stone. . . . all I'm trying to tell you, Tish, is I ain't offering you much. . . . you gone have to work, too, and when you come home most likely I'll just grunt and keep on with my chisels and shit and maybe sometimes you'll think I don't even know you're there. But don't ever think that, ever. You're with me all the time, all the time. Without you I don't know if I could make it at all, baby, and when I put down the chisel, I'll always come to you. . . ."⁷

There follows from the proposition a telluric love scene, complete with the rupture of Tish's hymen and the powerful flow of blood and seed:

Well, we were something of a sight. There was blood, quite a lot of it—or it seemed like a lot to me, but it didn't frighten me at all, I felt proud and happy—on him and on the bed and on me; his sperm and my blood were slowly creeping down my body, and his sperm was on him and on me; and, in the dim light and against our dark bodies, the effect was a strange anointing. Or, we might have just completed a tribal rite. . . .⁸

This stirring rites of passage, carried out against the background of Fonny's workshop, defines both the dramatic and the rhetorical significance of Tish's story: She not only yields to the terms of relationship as Fonny has imagined them but also sanctifies her complicity in notions which disguise her wonderful passivity. "Strange anointing," "tribal rite," "proud and happy," are offered

with not a trace of irony or second thought; Tish, true to romantic deception, is swept away by what her imagination has made a powerful eventfulness, hinting of first and last things. Her situation is precisely passionate, even agonistic, and whether or not it destroys her will depend a great deal on Fonny's generosity.

She has already told us earlier that a woman exists at the *mercy* of a man's imagination, and since the contract is merciful, then we need not wonder for long why Tish's love for Fonny is devout and all-consuming. She had *better* keep it together, being at his mercy, not unlike the weeping saints of the Temple, who kneel around God's altar. Baldwin would have us believe, however, that Fonny is more human and enlightened than the God of Darkness, even grants certain concessions to the woman: "I'll always come to you, I'll always come to you." But at the other end of this beneficent gesture is, of course, the waiting, patient female, who has no chisels and stone and wood to *live with*. What she does have is a dream of her strong man, and one's strong man can change his mind, as he often does, despite his promises, so for the woman, trust gets to be risky business. The man, after all, is at liberty, and in Fonny's case, plans to organize his love and work around a central place, the loft. Exactly what Fonny needs Tish for may be rather precisely guessed by anybody, since art is his "real life," but Tish, in love and trouble, seeks to contain the contradiction. To Fonny's apologia, she responds: "'Of course it's alright with me,' I said. I had more to say but my throat wouldn't open." We're very close to enthusiasms here with this otherwise articulate woman (she "tells" the whole book) struck dumb.

We already know Who calls people by the Thunder—and it is not Fonny—and Who, also, has people in His Hands, by God, and we also know how the elders say "I felt a change" when God converts one's life, but Baldwin has his tribal rite working here, and the juxtaposition of mystical language and sexual intent is not an error. Tish's love is transcendent, and we can nearly smell her demon-possession:

All that I could do was cling to him. . . .
 everything was breaking and changing and
 turning in me and moving toward him. . . .
 I heard, I felt his breath, as for the first
 time. . . .⁹

Tish receives Fonny's breath like a mystic might feel divine afflatus, but better than the mystic-lover is able to achieve, Tish has a demigod and man all wrapped up into a single living visible enigma. Baldwin, rather cunningly, has spliced together sacral impulse and secular practice into a swift concord of passion and purpose. This is heady stuff, and we should know, having been there before in our own naïveté and enchantment, but the kind of love projected in Tish and Fonny's story is not of this earth which insists that the gift of love, not even promised, must be earned through responsibility and error. The scene portrayed in these pages is love falling down, or spewing up, sacerdotal and whole, from some supernatural source. We are not far from the divine ground of being when lover becomes a presence: "It was a strange weight, a presence coming into me—into a man I had not known was there. . . ."10

The passage, by implication, is a revisitation of the myth of hyperbolean phallic status, the powerful male member which "stiffens and grows and throbs" and brings Tish to "another place." One laughs and cries, then both together, then calls out the lover's name. When men and women in church "get happy," they do the same thing, and it is all very well, but the potential problem for Tish is that Fonny has an option not allowed her or any of the other women in the novel. Fonny can return to his "real life," leaving Tish with the memory of their passion, waiting until he comes again (pun intended).

Baldwin is on the verge of something other than female sorrow in this novel, but he draws back from that something else, leaving his females in an essential state of emotional dependence. More precisely, the expense of female energy here is man-compelled, man-obsessed. When the women act (and they are probably his most active heroines) their action flows from the law of love; therefore, they exist for others. By contrast, or at least such contrast is implied, the men act on their own authority, a sometimes contradictory, curious mix of freedom and gallantry.

Since all the characters are black and, therefore, exaggeratedly vulnerable to the political power of white, none of them is free in the sense that Sartre might have meant it—being for oneself—but Baldwin has them moving in that direction, a forecast which decisively marks off the emphasis of this text from others written

in the sixties. Perhaps a transition, *Beale Street* stands at mid-ground between Baldwin's religious dramas and his brave new world, and his characters talk, then, out of both sides of their mouths, or perhaps the writer does. The women can take things in hand—Sharon Rivers goes to San Juan alone, without Spanish, to bring back Victoria Alvarez in person, but at the same time, she and her daughters, even Ernestine, perhaps the freest woman here, subscribe to traditional forms of behavior. After the stirring love scene, Fonny takes Tish home in order to explain to her parents why he has had her out so late. In the process, we imagine, he will assure Joseph (Tish's father) that his intentions are honorable. Fonny and Joseph go to another room of the house as the three women—Ernestine, Sharon, and Tish—await the outcome. That left-alone room-locked men often embroil the world in trouble—and call it "responsibility" for women—is no longer a secret, but the real point is that the powerful myth of brotherhood is a symptom of status and secrecy from which the exclusion of women is a dangerous re-enforcement of difference, but more than that, such exclusion magnifies the prerogatives of power in its negation of individual conscience. In the conference of the like-personalities, loyalty is a decisive motive and whether or not loyalty is responsible is a principal question of peace settlements and all historical movements. That these notions echo in Baldwin's pages re-enforces to my mind the decidedly hierarchical motions of this story.

Men are, in fact, men, and what they decide unto themselves is beyond the ken of women-reason. Why, in this case, Joseph and Fonny have to isolate themselves momentarily appears to be the chasing after taboo. Tish believes that their doing so is most eventful primarily because she accepts the terms of secrecy, wants to have it, wishes to believe that there is, indeed, some cause or reason more ultimate than her own to be assigned to Joseph and Fonny. Again, it is the accretions of mythical belief subtly playing over the surface of Tish's mind: By substitution, Fonny and Joseph are the custodians of a hieroglyph of experience to which access is granted only the priest, or the prince, or the warrior. This is a currency of belief I'd associate with medieval life, and not recent Harlem. It certainly opposes notions of tedious demo-

cratic order where the principals work through the substance and formality of problems.

This detail has its complement earlier in the text when the women are left alone, but, not as brotherly to each other as the men, the women hassle. We don't wonder that the men split: The women together have no sense. They call each other names, and before it's all over (about six agonized pages later), Ernestine spits in Mrs. Hunt's (Fonny's mother) face. Mrs. Hunt is the mad puritan, coming to visit the Rivers women and to condemn Tish's "lustful action":

I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son. You have a demon in you—I always knew it. My God caused me to know it many a year ago. The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb. But my son will be forgiven. My prayers will save him. . . .¹¹

The men leave, and what follows is an elaborately clinical scene, reminiscent of the T-group when participants confront each other with an unstinting rehearsal of their individual weaknesses, but there is nobody here to dispense the Kleenex or "resolve the conflict." Mrs. Hunt is as ridiculous and isolated and pathetic as the moment she walks in the house. Now she gets insulted.

Whether or not she brought on her own nemesis by cursing the unborn is quite beside the point, nor is it very interesting that she is a "dried-up yellow cunt" versus dark, sensuous folk, but it is certainly remarkable that her parody is unrelieved and that these otherwise compassionate women have no tricks up their sleeves to calm her. The one thing they agree on is that Fonny must be free, so their essential fight is not that the child has been cursed, but how will Fonny be possessed, and by whom. Mrs. Hunt is supposed to be the typically covetous hen, clucking over her brood, threatened by the advancing guard of hens, but none of them appears to notice that they engage a false motive, disguising from themselves their genuine fear—Fonny is potentially free and at will to choose both his love and his work. That they cannot perceive the common enemy (the woman's fear to risk aloneness or a self-imposed silence) but choose, instead, the noise and clamor of vain gestures, betrays the writer's mockery of their pain. If every-

body really is so offended beyond the common domestic courtesies, then why not have them fight it out? At pitch anger, can women only spit in each other's face? To "take it to the whoop," as men might say, would draw out the worth of the issue. After all, one fights for his life, or decides not too slowly that his life is not at stake. We could call it interestedness, but less than that, one dances in an attitude of interestedness without risking the dangers of decision. The women are safe from each other because they are selfless, in the shadow of the men and their time.

Living for their men, the women are an extension of the men's integrity. We may, therefore, regard their existence as inauthentic. Though such an evaluation is borrowed from the objective world, it is useful, by analogy, in exposing the opposition between symbolic behavior and freedom. The latter takes its chances in the world, risks the possibility that its status is sliding and relative, in tension with its environment and other human beings; the former, on the other hand, seeks a role to play, minimizing the spontaneity and danger of freedom. In objective time, neither symbolic behavior nor freedom exists in unalloyed autonomy, and we slide rather more subtly from role to freedom from it, back again. The fictional character, however, names his or her destiny in the very fact of characterization and is determined by laws of fiction as inexorable as fate. "Acting out of character," "inconsistent with character," describe our reaction to characters in real life or fiction who behave in a way that shocks or negates our expectations. In fact, our rebellion is often directed toward breaking from a role which others have imposed on us when we least suspected, or one that we have adopted ourselves to facilitate or appease or disguise some human process. But role moves toward mystification of personality, and, as a borrowing from the language of the theater, suggests stylization of personality as well. This happens in relationships when men and women insist that their functions are fixed and symbolic.

It is precisely this fixing or symbolification that Frank implies in *Beale Street* when he tells his daughters that they should be out on the streets "selling pussy" in order to raise enough money for the defense of Fonny, their brother. Since Frank has the idea, perhaps he should sell whatever the male equivalent of "pussy" would be in order to free his son. Because "pussy-selling" is alleged to be

the traditional response of women trapped by circumstance, Frank is able to make his daughters feel guilty about their womanhood. Frank would have them assume a symbolic task—perhaps it has nothing to do with whom or what they think they are, but everything, in his eyes, with what woman is.

There are societies where the symbolic personality is paradigmatic,¹² but in our situation with its emphasis on freedom and responsibility, self-reliance and individual esteem as variations of existentialia, the rhetorical personality tends to be an exaggeration or a distortion. New World history has moved decisively toward "I" as the dominant mode of all ethical consideration. The argument is not whether this is best, but that our circumstances militate against conservatism of motive as a strategic response to experience: Women work outside the home, very often away from their families, and they seek, therefore, a new centrality around which to build their lives. In other words, the vision of paternity, or father as central authority, has receded. In the absence of the father, the lone woman may seek to restore the notion of responsibility and authority by investing it anew in another male, but the challenge, not to be put off, is that the woman seek reconciliation by seizing her own potential.

In this sense, vocation, or relationship to the world of work, dictates a shift in the woman's metaphysical landscape. Where there was father protection, or parental authority of some kind, there is now risk, and the woman is thrown back on her own reserves. Nothing stands now between her and the world, lest intellectual, artistic, or political activity fill up the vacuum. Under new historical conditions, based in the division of labor as the central mode of discourse, and the rise and expanse of the professions, life issues are seen to emanate from concrete sources. Now status, or standing, is the right not only to earn one's own money but to dictate also how one will organize her own consciousness of time as an instrument of creative endeavor.

The impression that freedom is always antagonistic to role-playing is false, although we may simplify the analysis by opposing them. This theoretical opposition by way of fictive characterization moves us into the right ball park, so to speak, but it does not exhaust the game or the "program of action" which women engage in in their own "politics of intimacy." Outside

fiction, the question is: What are the terms of relationship to be worked out between partners when the social and moral condition, given a change of slope in the landscape, conforms to other than traditional life patterns? By implication, the man is also drawn into the inquiry, and whatever changes of status the woman sustains will also affect him in dynamic ways. These changes in the propositions of relationship, the soil from which they spring, lead us to perceive the "politics of intimacy" as a dialectical encounter rather than an antagonism of opposites—in other words, the situation requires *conversation*, the act of living among others, in all the dignity and concentration that the term implies. It is this tension in our dynamic experience which shocks mythic expectations.

As we have seen in *Beale Street*, love between Tish and Fonny is noumenal—something God-given, the marriage made in Heaven, not quite of this earth—and therefore, it escapes the dynamic character of reality. This escape names the common attitude of both characters—their perceptions, their values, their activity, are colored by these symbolic assumptions which they take on as a function of legacy. In having achieved the perfect symbolic union, they demonstrate the paradox of motion—touched by death, moving on this earth, in this time at once. Their situation is closed.

In objective experience, this attempt to block the corruption of time and mutability in intimate encounter often leads the woman to error. First, she imbues the male with an extraordinary dimension, as Tish gives Fonny "strangeness." This kind of fantastic investment often amounts to confusion of the sex act with the commitment of love. (Tish makes the sexual encounter a "tribal rite.") Men appear less confused about it, but it is very likely that our own susceptibility to the assumptions of European courtly love tradition and, closer, the Puritan equation between love, sex, and duty leads to this confusion of historical necessity. The truth is that we may not need this baggage of inherited belief in order to express love and companionship. Again, love and companionship for one's mother (whose entire life was sacrificed to her children) must be understood in light of the daughter's different situation.

Secondly, the woman in love tends to assume that *all* the particular males of her race "belong" to her—"our men." These males

become, then, an extension of her own ego, while she, ironically, gives up her authority to them in intimate encounter. The perception of love as possession is a distorted feature of the woman's urge for permanence, but it is particularly dangerous to locate that urge in a man, since he is not the object of her own personal history, but the primary subject of his own. One possesses objects; even better, one tries to create them. Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a compelling recent fiction whose heroine eloquently demonstrates this issue:

In a way her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And, like an artist with no art form, she became dangerous. . . .¹³

Morrison's message is clear—and it is my own: Women must seek to become their own historical subject in pursuit of its proper object, its proper and specific expression in time. In that sense, male absence or mutability in intimate relationship is not the leading proposition of a woman's life, but a single aspect of an interlocking arrangement of life issues. Through the discipline and decorum exacted by form, the woman's reality is no longer a negation, but a positive and dynamic expressiveness—a figure against a field—shaped by her own insistence.

Thus, the grammar subsumed by the theme of intimacy and its accompanying attitudes and hidden assumptions are parodic unless they reflect a situation whose contradictions have been heightened. The new grammar has no particular standard or rule, unlike the dictates of courtly love or the laws of "seduction and betrayal," but will be shaped by the specific environment of relationships. Under the impetus of alternative—one of them contraceptive and chemical—women, in short, introduced a new dynamic to the old equation of love. From the fragments of the myth of male dominion, we seek to structure a new way of saying things, one apposite and graceful to the new situation. The ur-

gency is to acquire a language which expresses the woman's grasp of reality as present and immediate; even in love, such urgency must not be suspended.

NOTES

1. This much-anthologized poem is perhaps best identified by its opening six lines:

What is Africa to me?
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang.

2. Arna Bontemps, ed., *American Negro Poetry* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1963), p. 83.
3. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 91.
4. James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (New York: Dial Press, 1964), Act III, p. 125.
5. James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), pp. 196-97.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
13. Intended to be read by Lionel Trilling at the Jane Austen Bicentennial Conference at the University of Alberta, October 1975, "Why We Read Jane Austen" was not delivered by the author, who was too ill to attend. Trilling died in November 1975. Picking up observations made by Clifford Geertz, the distinguished anthropologist, Trilling shares many insights into the epistemology of culture with a discussion of Javanese and Balinese societies as an aspect of his own argument (*The Times Literary Supplement*, March 5, 1976, pp. 250-52). The essay is unfinished.
14. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 105.