

Article

“Norman... I Hate to Talk About Norman”: The Art of the Insult and Literary Friendship, Circa 1960

Florian Sedlmeier

Institute of English and American Studies, University of Hamburg, 20146 Hamburg, Germany;
florian.sedlmeier@uni-hamburg.de

Abstract

The essay rereads the literary field of the mid-twentieth century as structured by “the art of the insult”—a game the literati, exemplified by James Baldwin and Norman Mailer, are invested in. In essays and interviews, these writers engage in *ad hominem* verbal attacks to test the limits of the socially sayable, which are also the limits of personal friendship. Existing scholarship has shown how the fraught relation between Baldwin and Mailer was marked by gender, race, and sexuality. Drawing on under-researched and newly accessible material, the article makes the case that these differences are superseded by the shared identity as literati who ground literary innovation in social provocation. The alliance culminates in their closing ranks to censor and legitimize the underlying scandal: Mailer’s physical assault against his wife Adele, whose autobiography the article considers in closing.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu; James Baldwin; William Faulkner; Adele Mailer; Norman Mailer; Norman Podhoretz; literary field; friendship; scandal; censorship; postwar U.S.

1. Introduction

On 7 May 1963, the radio station KPFA in Berkeley, California, aired an interview with James Baldwin, the transcript of which has recently been published by *The James Baldwin Review*. On one end, the conversation was about race, in Baldwin’s words: “the greatest metaphor we have in this country” (Baldwin 2024, p. 85), and about his position as a Black American writer. To another, the interviewers, Elsa Knight Thompson and John Leonard, wanted to lure Baldwin into commenting on fellow writers and recent publications. A paper trail preceded the conversation. Referencing Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro” (N. Mailer [1957] 1959c), the essay in which he developed “this idea of the hipster,” Leonard asks him whether he thought Mailer would be “jealous in some way” (Baldwin 2024, p. 88). After all, Mailer had claimed that the hipster resulted from “a ménage-à-trois” where “the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro” (N. Mailer [1957] 1959c, p. 302). The “Negro,” from within this metaphorical threesome, would channel the experience of structural discrimination in a daily struggle for survival into cutting-edge cultural production.

When thus asked to talk about Mailer, Baldwin interrupts Leonard. He declines to comment, “leaving Norman for the moment out of it” (Baldwin 2024, p. 88). Instead, the conversation detours to the Beatniks: “I was beat long before the Beat generation ever was heard of or thought of” (ibid., p. 89; emphasis in original). Relating a personal anecdote about his father, who was, not for the first time, fired from a job, Baldwin asserts that “these cats who have discovered this vocabulary *twenty years* later don’t know what they



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are talking about" (ibid.; emphases in original). He thus reclaims the political and social dimensions of an idiomatic language expressive of Black American experience, whose existentialism the Beats could merely mimic. When Leonard asks him what he thinks of the Beatniks' literary output, Jack Kerouac's in particular, Baldwin interrupts him yet again: "It's *not* writing. It is self-indulgent. It is masturbation. It is not writing. I hate to say that, but it is true. I mean he's talented. So is everybody at the age of five" (ibid., emphasis in original). While "hat[ing] to say that," Baldwin nonetheless insults Kerouac, because "it is true": likening his literary output to both uncontrolled teenage sexuality and children's games without wider social significance, he denies him inclusion in the group of the serious literati. On closer inspection, Baldwin's takedown in the Berkeley interview riffs on Mailer's derogatory comments about Kerouac, published in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) as part of a piece titled "Evaluations—Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room." As Rachel Cohen puts it, the whole piece consists of "a series of insults" (R. Cohen 2004, p. 239) directed at his contemporaries, including Baldwin. Mailer deems Kerouac "as pretentious as a rich whore, as sentimental as a lollipop" (N. Mailer 1959a, p. 427). While the Beat writer would release his "literary energy" in an "ecstatic flux," he should not be viewed as a novelist but "as an action painter or a bard" (ibid.), a Jackson Pollock or Walt Whitman.

Mailer's and Baldwin's rhetorics resonate with the semantic field associated with "the culture of spontaneity"—Daniel Belgrad's sweeping term for a postwar U.S. artistic mode of experiential and expressive subjectivity opposing the technology-induced, mass-mediated "corporate liberalism" (Belgrad 1998, p. 5). At the same time, this general countercultural liberalism feeds on sexual metaphors, partly owed to the widespread "intellectual and popular preoccupation with psychoanalysis" in the postwar U.S. (Herzog 2017, p. 1), as traced by Dagmar Herzog. The ubiquity of this reception has consequences for the relay between sexuality and scandal, established by William A. Cohen. In the second half of the nineteenth century, he argues, building on Michel Foucault, "the unspeakable status of sexuality" was strategically established as "the very condition for its modern discursive formation" (W. A. Cohen 1996, p. 2). In postwar America, the widespread cultural presence of psychoanalytic language complemented the sex research advanced by Alfred Charles Kinsey, William H. Masters, and Virginia E. Johnson that sent shockwaves through the American public. The unspeakable gradually came to the surface of explicit language, making Cohen's question—"how sex was made scandalous" (ibid., p. 3; emphasis in original)—differently relevant.

Circa 1960, the conditions of the scandalous, whether related to sexuality or not, were shifting, at least for literati proclaiming to test the limits of the sayable in a climate where state repression was legitimized in the name of the Red Scare, where same-sex sexual activity continued to be criminalized even if it came to be scientifically normalized, and where the laws of racial segregation prohibited sex and marriage across the black–white binary. Against this backdrop, I argue, writers personalized the critical takedown in essays, interviews, and reviews, relying on judgmental metaphors of sexual practice, projection, and orientation with corresponding, racialized ascriptions of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality, then, was a dispositif used to render critical and personal judgment inextricable. I dub this mode of *ad hominem* criticism the art of the insult. For mid-century writers, the art of the insult became a crucial game in the literary field. With Pierre Bourdieu, that field is characterized by "the institutionalization of permanent revolution as the legitimate mode of transformation" (Bourdieu 1996, p. 219), or by "bold strokes of innovation" that activate "*structural lacunae*" (ibid., p. 235; emphasis in original). The art of the insult turned the personal, sexualized provocation into a claim for literary innovation made possible by its unspeakable presence in the nineteenth century. Notably, this claim was less about

formal innovation in writing. It related literary innovation to what sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner called “social identity”: “The process by which the individual is classified [...] in terms of [...] culturally prescribed categories” (Gouldner 1957, p. 283). The art of the insult, understood as a key mechanism of the field circa 1960, relayed these social identities to a shared identity as literati. As a legitimizing game, it was highly profitable for players like Baldwin and Mailer, fostering their careers. When verbal insults turned into physical violence, as Mailer stabbed his wife Adele Morales, the literati closed ranks.

The gambit was nonetheless risky. At stake were not only publicized cultural provocation and professional peer validation. Baldwin’s move to cite and riff on Mailer’s takedown of Kerouac can be read as an attempt to reconnect as friends who speak a shared language after their falling out over printed insults. In the interview with KPFA, Baldwin’s charge against Kerouac prompts Leonard to ask, again: “What about Mailer?” (Baldwin 2024, p. 89). Now, Baldwin comes around, somewhat: “Norman is something else again.” The idiom is crucial. It conveys, simultaneously, exceptional status, amused bewilderment, and repugnance. Baldwin continues: “Norman is... Norman’s more than talented. Norman could become, could have become anyway, a fantastic writer. I don’t think he... I don’t know. Norman... I hate to talk about Norman” (ibid.). To have more than talent means, again, to be in a singular category, but Baldwin insinuates unrealized potential. Notably, interruptions continue in this interview. Now they appear to be taking the form of self-censorship.

If “our speech (especially in public) is immediately theatrical” (Barthes 1991, p. 3) and if “speech is always tactical” (ibid., p. 4), as Roland Barthes suggests when discussing the genre of the interview, the pauses in speech, marked in the transcript by ellipses, are key elements of these theatrics and tactics. The pauses may indicate an awareness that “speech is dangerous because it is immediate and cannot be taken back” (ibid.), whether on live radio or in face-to-face conversations. Then again, one can be skeptical about Barthes’s ascription of the irrevocable presence to speech. What has been published in print cannot be taken back either. It can be corrected by follow-up writing and talking. When we read Baldwin’s pauses as a form of self-censoring in reaction to what has been said and printed, they corroborate his statement: “I hate to talk about Norman.”

If the gist of his paused remarks is that Mailer has extraordinary talent, which is to say more than Kerouac, but has not yet realized it, and likely never will, Baldwin partly mimics Mailer’s earlier homophobic charge against him in *Advertisements for Myself*: “one itches at times to take a hammer to his detachment, smash the perfumed dome of his ego, and reduce him to what must be one of the most tortured and magical nerves of our time” (N. Mailer 1959a, p. 433). I will return to this insult in a later part of this essay, when discussing Baldwin’s written reply, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” (1961). I will also take up Mailer’s itch to exert physical violence and discuss Mailer’s stabbing of his wife, Adele. This notorious incident marks a silenced context for the alliance of the literati in the name of a linguistic violence that defines the game I call the art of the insult. For now, let it be noted that Baldwin’s tactics in the interview, his refusal to talk and his pauses, imitate conventions of censorship. The pauses point to Mailer’s written lines that perhaps had been better left unwritten. If these pauses do not tell, they show by omission. They indicate a speechlessness and perform what should have been unspeakable.

Everything insinuated in this conversation transcript had been printed. The Berkeley interviewers refer to a paper trail, to the provocative verbal blows traded between Baldwin and Mailer, marking something profound about private affairs made public among the postwar literati. If Barthes claims that “in rewriting what we have said we protect ourselves, we keep an eye on ourselves, we censure and delete our blunders” (Barthes 1991, p. 4), he attaches an ethics of self-protection to writing. The paper trail preceding Baldwin’s

Berkeley interview shows the opposite: writing circa 1960—a moment when the FBI had files on many known writers, when the House Un-American Activities Committee subpoenaed cultural producers, and when the Internal Revenue Service was used as an instrument to ruin financially those suspected of being un-American—thrived on cultural provocation and personal insult. Paradoxically, as the threats of state suppression and surveillance peaked, the literati doubled the stakes, constituting themselves as a group of friendly competitors who probed the limits of what could be said and printed.

2. Friendship

What can be said in writing? The consensus answer of those invested in the art of the insult was: (almost) anything. I read the cited snippets from published writing and soundbites from the interview as expressions of the stakes of the literary field. These stakes are high and reach across the private–public divide. They are about the limits of friendships formed in the name of belonging to the literati. In the case of Baldwin and Mailer, these limits are framed by sexuality and race, the two differentials highlighted in the scholarship on these two writers. They feature in two canonical sources on friendship. Michel de Montaigne, raised Catholic and partly of Jewish descent, conceived of it as a voluntary association that transcends other modes of sociality, including filiation, marriage, and statehood. In “On Friendship” (de Montaigne [1580] 1993), he mourns the loss of Étienne de la Boétie, whose work he claims to continue. It is thus a friendship in the name of writing. For Montaigne, friendship meant to communicate in dialogue, which is also the affordance of the essay (Junker 2010, p. 133). One might likewise detect an underlying discourse of homosociality and homoeroticism. Montaigne is careful to assert that “that alternative, permitted by the Greeks, our morality rightly abhors” (de Montaigne [1580] 1993, p. 95). But his discourse on “the Greeks” nonetheless leads up to the key passage on his friendship with de la Boétie, which he describes as “a more right and proper kind of friendship” (ibid., p. 97). “If I were pressed to say why I love him,” he writes, “I feel that my only reply could be: ‘Because it was he, because it was I’” (ibid.). Here the friendship between two men is based on their singularity, which in turn preconditions their union as intellectual soulmates, with bodily desire censored and rendered unspeakable by cultural context.

If Montaigne establishes friendship among intellectuals in relation to homosociality and homoeroticism, the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau racializes friendship by situating it in the context of colonial settlement, likewise marked by a sense of loss and mourning. In “Friendship,” an essay initially published in his travel diary *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Thoreau [1849] 1907), Thoreau gives the historical example of the friendship between a “stern, imperturbable warrior,” the indigenous Wawatam, and the white fur trader Alexander Henry, on whose frontier story he relies as a source. Wawatam “comes to the white man’s lodge, and affirms that he is the white brother whom he saw in his dream, and adopts him henceforth” (Thoreau [1849] 1907, pp. 20–21). In Henry’s account of friendship as symbolic filiation and adoption, as quoted by Thoreau, the warrior disappears, turning into a rendition of the trope of the vanishing Indian. “The only danger in Friendship,” Thoreau writes, “is that it will end” (ibid., p. 25), whether by death, which is inevitable, or by a falling out. What the literati circa 1960 performed is not only marked by sexuality and race, though. They constructed a bond of friendship in which insults based on these social identities were traded on paper, conditioning membership in the peer group.

By the time of the KPFA interview, Baldwin and Mailer were close to being what Norman Podhoretz, whom Baldwin in that interview calls “a friend of mine” (Baldwin 2024, p. 86), has labeled “ex-friends.” In 2000, Podhoretz described his falling out with various intellectual friends over shifting political affiliations and cultural ideas, naming the ultimate

repercussion: being excluded from what he calls, in the register of genealogy, “the Family” (Podhoretz 2000, p. 11), which translates into being cut off from communication, to be “excommunicated” (ibid., p. 3), as he writes in the register of ecclesiastical censure. This excommunication, which Podhoretz experienced during the 1970s when he became “a key figure in the neoconservative movement” (Friedman 2005, p. 34), manifested itself in retributive attacks or, worse, the silent treatment as a form of group-defining censorship: “they attacked me back or else tried to pretend, by ignoring my work, that I did not exist” (Podhoretz 2000, p. 4).

The question of who was included in the Family is key. As for Mailer, Podhoretz professes to have been “the critic who had in effect brought him into the Family” (ibid., p. 192). Baldwin figures in a footnote, next to others, in the chapter on Hannah Arendt. Podhoretz here corrects the impression that the Family consisted exclusively of Jewish intellectuals. The list includes the likes of Dwight MacDonald and Mary McCarthy, and further “close relatives (or ‘kissing cousins,’ as I once liked to call them) like Robert Lowell [...], Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin” (ibid., p. 140fn). In a different sense than Mailer, Baldwin was peripheral to the circle of the Family, comprising cultural critics and literary writers. In contradistinction to Podhoretz, both belonged more firmly to the literati. The possibility of this shared membership, cutting across but being nonetheless informed by their social identities, should be understood against the backdrop of *de jure* racial segregation. By foregrounding the racial divide in the language of sexuality, the art of the insult paradoxically served to project a literary desegregation as an effect of the field: the possibility that Black Americans, such as Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, could participate with other “kissing cousins” alongside white and Jewish American players in the friendly competitions among literati and intellectuals.

The prominence of the art of the insult, as a central game in the mid-century literary field, depended on two developments. The first was “the emergence of celebrity authorship as a crucial instance of the dialectical engagement between modernism and mass culture” (Glass 2004, p. 23), traced by Loren Glass. The example of Mailer shows, however, “this dialectic, in the postmodern era, no longer provides the cultural leverage it once had” (ibid., p. 22). For Glass, this development rests on the incorporation of “publishing into the larger structure of the culture industries” and with the eroding status of literature in the formation of “a cultural consensus” (ibid.). Against this backdrop, I take the literati’s enormous investment in themselves as a countercultural demographic to be a vanguardist turn under different auspices. The older anxiety around the market and the charge of selling out are no longer much of a problem. Literary vocation, a Romanticist conception whose legitimizing force scholars of literary sociology, such as Bell (2001) and Leypoldt (2021), have explored, could more seamlessly translate into commercial success.

If mid-century writers embraced lives of much celebrity and publicity, they did it under specific media conditions. They published in intellectual publications such as *Commentary* and *Dissent*, while simultaneously and for substantial revenue typing pieces for men’s magazines like *Esquire* and *Playboy*. They were the subjects of extensive magazine features, participated in televised roundtables on social questions, appeared on The Dick Cavett Show, and joined protest marches, which served as material for their essays and novels. The media prominence of these writers and their projected large, diverse audience may have contributed to a sense of authorial self-importance characteristic of the mid-century field. Much as they relied on different magazines with different markets, from a peer to a mass audience, their gesture repeated the late-nineteenth-century one of aesthetic autonomy, then “a position to be made” (Bourdieu 1996, p. 76; emphases in original), as Bourdieu writes. Their “call for ethical freedom, even prophetic provocation” likewise came with a rejection of “the injunctions of morality” and “a distance from all institutions” (ibid., p. 77). But

their anti-bourgeois self-definition by provocation, by their investment in the art of the insult, remade the nineteenth-century position of the “unprecedented social personage who is the modern writer or artist” (ibid., p. 76) into a double figure: the literati as a shared identity above the fray of politics colluded with the grounding of writing in social identity, as defined by Gouldner (1957), and with writing on the corresponding social issues.

There is no shortage of readings of Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro,” a key document for understanding the cultural scene circa 1960, first published in Irving Howe’s *Dissent* in 1957. I will not give another full analysis because I would have little to add. As Steve Shoemaker, who reads Mailer as a displaced version of “the Romantic prophet” (Shoemaker 1991, p. 343), holds in one of the earlier contributions: “It can hardly be denied that Mailer’s essay is full of questionable cultural assumptions, not only about blacks, but about women and homosexuals as well” (ibid., p. 355). Following Lott (1993), who reads “The White Negro” as a revenant of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, several scholars have criticized Mailer for reproducing gendered, racialized, and sexualized fantasies (Levine 2003; Whiting 2005; Junker 2010; Taylor 2010). I restrict myself to Mailer’s retrospective contextualization of his essay. Likely because of critical rebuttals by Baldwin and others for reproducing primitivist tropes, he always considered it one of his important texts. He reprinted it in his later collections, *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) and *The Time of Our Time* (1998). In the former, he prefaced the essay with an account of its genesis, “The Sixth Advertisement for Myself.” The story he tells is that of the writer in crisis who struggled with addiction and “began to live with the conviction that I had burned out my talent” (N. Mailer 1959b, p. 295). Once again, it is the question of not-yet-realized talent that enables the provocations of “The White Negro,” the text positioned to end the burnout, which is couched in “a narrative of detoxification” (Junker 2010, p. 218). Mailer’s retrospective self-narration frames the genesis of the essay with a statement (and responses) on the reasons for the impossibility of desegregation in the South, which he penned after a conversation with Lyle Stuart, publisher of the monthly tabloid *The Independent*. In the statement, which he drafted to settle a discussion with Stuart “about how much freedom there was in the mass-media,” Mailer accounted for the hypocrisy of Southern racism in terms of sexual possession and projection: white men have “symbolically and materially [...] possessed Negro womanhood for two centuries,” while simultaneously fearing “the sexual potency of the Negro” (N. Mailer 1959b, p. 295). One should note that Mailer’s analysis raises the taboo topic of miscegenation, implied in both the history of symbolic and material possession of Black women by white men and the projected threat of Black American men having sex with white women.

Instead of publishing Mailer’s statement, Stuart first sent it to William Faulkner (among others), who responded by letter that he had “heard this idea expressed several times during the last twenty years, though not before by a man,” but by “ladies, northern or middle-western ladies,” wondering what “a psychiatrist” might say about Mailer’s lines (ibid., p. 296). By “this idea,” Faulkner likely meant Mailer’s narrative of Black male sexual superiority, not addressing the complementary discourse of white male sexual ownership. Rejecting the Southern specificity of Mailer’s analysis, Faulkner’s insult consists of the recommendation to consult a psychiatrist, by implication, a feminization of Mailer. Mailer, while conceding that his “words may have been badly chosen,” claims that “they were not that easy to put into print” and replies with a double insult: “Like many novelists who have created an extraordinary body of work, Mr. Faulkner is a timid man who has led a sheltered life. So I would not be surprised if he has had his best and most intense conversations with sensitive middle-aged ladies” (ibid.). On the one hand, Mailer, while recognizing Faulkner’s artistic achievements, excludes him from a new generation of cutting-edge literati after

modernism; on the other, he repeats Faulkner's gendered pejorative to emasculate him in return.

Reflecting on how he could have left but did not leave the exchange at that, Mailer reprints the rest of his reply, returning to miscegenation and desegregation: "[...] I heard 'my' ideas expressed in one form or another by a most intelligent Negro car-washer in Queens, a mulatto sneak-thief and pimp who was a friend of some friends of mine, and lastly by a rather remarkable woman who had been the madam of a whorehouse in South Carolina [...] and somehow succeeded in raising her family and passing into a life-loving middle age" (ibid.). Racializing and differentiating by skin color, Mailer claims to have channeled in his statement the "ideas" of various Black Americans he has met, from those working odd jobs in the service industry to those working in the shadow economies of drug trade and prostitution, while allowing for a story of survival and social uplift in the last example. Drawing on the anecdotal evidence of these fleeting personal encounters across the color line, he marks Faulkner as trapped in a segregationist life. The move serves to legitimize his written provocation: his statement prints the word on the street, with the "friends of mine" marked as cultural insiders, likely referring to Black American literati and artists he hung out with.

Mailer's musings belong to an extended dialogue on desegregation involving W.E.B. Du Bois, Hannah Arendt, and others (cf. [Junker 2010](#), pp. 207–51). At the end of "The White Negro," he comes back to desegregation and miscegenation, his retrospective framing in "The Sixth Advertisement for Myself," with a stunning twist that charges liberals: "it is quite likely that the reactionary sees the reality more closely than the liberal when he argues that the deeper issue is not desegregation but miscegenation." (N. Mailer [1957] 1959c, p. 318). For Mailer, conservative political anxieties about racial mixing were more insightful for social diagnostics than liberal fantasies—with conservatism here being defined, in the words of Bryan Santin, "as an ideology that prefers gradual social change in order to prevent harmful, unforeseen consequences" ([Santin 2021](#), p. 97). This view complements Michael Szalay's, for whom Mailer represents a formation of postwar liberalism he calls "literary hip." The texts in that formation address "the professional-managerial class" affiliated with the Democratic Party and "transport whites into imagined bodies of African Americans"—a return of blackface "dematerialized, as a figurative 'second skin'" ([Szalay 2012](#), p. 4).

The "friends of mine" Mailer refers to in the genesis story of "The White Negro" included James Baldwin, who was no stranger to the art of the insult even before he met Mailer. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," included in his collection *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), whose title, following ([Gates 2014](#), pp. 120–23), could be said to "signify" on Richard Wright's bestselling *Native Son* (1940), Baldwin charged Wright with reproducing the stereotype of the violent Black man—for him, and this is the literary insult, a complementary figure to Harriet Beecher Stowe's submissive Uncle Tom. Like Faulkner, whom Baldwin criticized in "Faulkner and Desegregation" (1961), Wright, initially a mentor to Baldwin, was of a different generation. For Baldwin, the art of the insult serves several purposes: to criticize white writers like Faulkner; to position himself as Richard Wright's legitimate heir; and to probe the limits of his friendship with his contemporaries, notably Jewish American writers and intellectuals like Mailer, Podhoretz, and Irving Howe.

3. Falling Out

In "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," Baldwin assesses his friendship with Mailer, reacting to his written offenses. After all, he now had "to be bemused, if not offended, by Mailer's odd notion of friendship," as James Campbell puts it ([Campbell 1991](#), p. 140). Baldwin's title, which mixes desire, fascination, and diagnostics in the visual

regime and performs the color line, contains the first insult: The Jewish American Mailer is marked as white, denying the possibility that Mailer may have looked at the figure of the hipster with a critical distance (Baldwin concedes only once in his essay that “Norman is a middle-class Jew,” Baldwin [1961] 1998, p. 269). It is no less crucial that both are boys, not grown-ups, searching for their individual identity against their ascribed social ones. The personal essay, reprinted in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), was initially published by *Esquire* in the same year, two years before the Berkeley radio interview. “Throughout the 1960s,” Brad Congdon writes, “*Esquire* continued to assume a white male readership, while also invoking fear of black radicalism” (Congdon 2018, p. 76). At the same time, Baldwin, who was interviewed but also a target of several pieces published in the magazine, conceived of African American male “disempowerment as emasculation” and viewed that emasculation as “the root of racial segregation” (ibid., p. 72).

While the sexualized metaphors are prominent in Baldwin’s assessment of his friendship with Mailer, which is at the same time a reply to both “The White Negro” and Mailer’s comments on Baldwin in *Advertisements for Myself*, they should, again, not be thought without the investment in the shared, desegregating notion of writers who test the limits of what can be said and written. Baldwin’s theorizing of identity may anticipate a key insight of deconstruction and poststructuralism, namely that “identity depends on difference” (Abdur-Rahman 2015, p. 169), as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman argues. But it remains simultaneously invested in a sameness of the field position I have called the literati, spurred by the art of the insult, which in turn rested on racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference. Baldwin frames his essay accordingly from the outset:

I first met Norman Mailer about five years ago, in Paris, at the home of Jean Malaquais. Let me bring in at once the theme that will repeat itself over and over throughout this love letter: I was then (and I have not changed much) a very tight, tense, lean, abnormally ambitious, abnormally intelligent, and hungry black cat. It is important that I admit that, at the time I met Norman, I was extremely worried about my career; and a writer who is worried about his career is also fighting for his life. (Baldwin [1961] 1998, p. 269)

Meeting in the war-ravaged city of love, to which Baldwin had moved in 1948 with the declared goal of becoming a writer, almost by default requires a “love letter.” The clichéd Romantic genre marker, in this case, dragging the private into the public, can be read as an ironic label, since there might not be much love lost between the two after Mailer’s printed insults. More intriguingly, though, it reads as a genuine expression of affection and infatuation, which contains unrequited, unspeakable love, a homoeroticization of their friendship, echoing Montaigne, and thus, not least, an affront to Mailer’s heterosexual bravado. To an extent, Baldwin queers Mailer. In any case, this love letter is written in the name of a friendship enabled by a shared identity as writers. If Mailer tells his genesis of “The White Negro” as a story of artistic crisis, Baldwin frames their encounter with his own career anxieties. His vulnerability and insecurity are strategically counterpointed by, or better, result from the assertion of an ambition and intelligence placed outside the norm.

About the time he met Mailer, Baldwin published *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), which his U.S. publisher Knopf initially would not print. Its contents were controversial. The novella’s opening paragraph refuses expectations of Black authors writing about Black experience, playing with the personal pronouns “I” and “me” to reveal, in the third sentence, that the autodiegetic narrator is white, male, and of ambiguous sexual orientation. The text’s intense psycho-narration—resonating with Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940)—was scandalous. It broke the taboo of representing interracial and homosexual relations, which happened off the page but could only be spoken of in secret. With respect to reader expectations for

authors marked as Black, namely that the social identity primarily represented in the novel should match the one ascribed to the author, Baldwin's novella was the ultimate breach: a written representation of a social role that Baldwin could not have fully lived. Other mid-century Black American authors, including Chester Himes and Frank Yerby, likewise wrote in the key of what Vaughn Rasberry identifies as "a new genre [...] the so-called novel of white life" (Rasberry 2011, p. 85). In his "Evaluations—Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room," Mailer would judge *Giovanni's Room* "a bad book, but mostly a brave one" (N. Mailer 1959a, p. 472), with bravery likely referring to the choice of a white narrator who will turn out to be a closeted gay man. Baldwin's retrospective lines about his artistic crisis at the beginning of "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," account for this judgment. While promised by the first sentence of the essay, the narration of his initial encounter with Mailer was interrupted by Baldwin's reflection on his career worries. It continues as follows:

We liked each other at once, but each was frightened that the other would pull rank. He could have pulled rank on me because he was more famous and had more money and also because he was white; but I could have pulled rank on him precisely because I was black and knew more about that periphery he so helplessly maligns in *The White Negro* than he could ever hope to know. Already, you see, we were trapped in our roles and our attitudes: the toughest kid on the block was meeting the toughest kid on the block. I think that both of us were pretty weary of this grueling and thankless role, I know that I am; but the roles we construct are constructed because we feel they will help us survive and also, of course, because they fulfill something in our personalities; and one does not, therefore, cease playing a role simply because one has begun to understand it. All roles are dangerous. The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play; and it is not always easy—in fact, it is always extremely hard—to maintain a kind of watchful look, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is. (Baldwin [1961] 1998, pp. 270–71)

The parallel sentence structures and use of punctuation dramatize the encounter as a potential standoff, which threatens what is otherwise described as spontaneous sympathy. There is at least as much commonality as there is difference here: we find the black–white binary as a structural element, and we find recourse to the shared position of the celebrity author. They knew each other's names and status before their encounter. The hypothetical scenario of "pulling rank" depends upon several factors. In Mailer's case, a connection between fame, money, and whiteness; for Baldwin, the experience of being Black, which generates a specific epistemology presented as a curse and a privilege, echoing W.E.B. Du Bois's famous "double consciousness." Echoing the Kerouac critique, the contest is about discursive authority and symbolic ownership of "the periphery," of the margins, in terms of class, race, and, implicitly, sexuality. Who owns the street and who can speak for the periphery depend on one's life experience. And yet, when the quoted lines directly address the reader ("you see"), another level of analysis is required: "we were trapped in our roles and attitudes." Being trapped in roles and attitudes refers to being "the toughest kid on the block;" one may occupy different sides on different streets. The discursive containment of one's identity in a single role reduces the complexity of social existence. While "dangerous" in this respect, constructed roles are necessary. They allow for tactical maneuvering in the game of field positioning. But the performance of constructed roles no less brings us in touch with facets of "our personalities." If one understands one's role, it does not mean one can stop playing it. Baldwin suggests that performance heightens the awareness of the roles one plays, and by extension, of one's personality. It is crucial, if "always extremely hard," for the performer of a role to be alert and assume a "mocking distance" between

one's expected appearance and "oneself as one actually is." With this last utterance, ironic distance and self-irony emerge as crucial components of Baldwin's poetics of identity as performance, to the extent that he locates a sense of agency in the rhetoric of irony. While roles are crucial for identity exploration, they need to be consciously controlled to keep separate expected role performance and a sense of genuine self.

In Baldwin's love letter, this sense of self that brackets the roles emerges in moments of private conviviality. These are the moments when the burden of ascribed internalized roles, whether ones resting on different social identities or the shared one as literati, can be overcome: "But we were far more cheerful than anything I've said might indicate and none of the above seemed to matter very much at the time. Other things mattered, like walking and talking and drinking and eating, and the way Adele laughed, and the way Norman argued" (ibid., p. 272). Intimate face-to-face encounters, the historically older conception of an interview, have a reassuring quality. Baldwin's text performs the renewed sense of connection and togetherness in its use of "and." Such encounters, though, are precarious and rare. In effect, large parts of the narrative tension in Baldwin's essay derive from presenting delayed and deliberately missed encounters. Given Mailer's literary assaults, reconciliation is hard to achieve. Baldwin writes that he "could not, with the best will in the world, make sense out of *The White Negro*" (ibid., p. 276); he finds it difficult "to imagine that this essay had been written by the same man who wrote the novels" (ibid., p. 277), implying a misguided use of talent, also by a wrong choice of genre (by implication, Baldwin claims essayistic superiority simply by writing his playful love letter). Mailer's personal takedown of Baldwin in his "Evaluations" prompts a different reaction. In the beginning, I quoted briefly from it, but here is a fuller version:

James Baldwin is too charming a writer to be major. If in *Notes of a Native Son* he has a sense of moral nuance which is one of the few modern guides to the sophistication of the ethos, even the best of his paragraphs are sprayed with perfume. Baldwin seems incapable of saying 'Fuck you' to the reader [. . .]. His second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, was a bad book but mostly a brave one, and since his life has been as fantastic and varied as the life of any of my fellow racketeers, and he has kept his sensitivity, one itches at times to take a hammer to his detachment, smash the perfumed dome of his ego, and reduce him to what must be one of the most tortured and magical nerves of our time. (N. Mailer 1959a, pp. 432–33)

Again, what matters above all else is talent and its realization, whether one is or can be a major or a minor writer. "Moral nuance" and "sophistication of the ethos" suggest that literary greatness is inextricable from social impact. For Mailer, though, this impact requires more than bravery. It needs extreme provocation, the art of the insult his lines perform. Baldwin would cater too much to the tastes of average readers, and not be radical and offensive enough. Mailer's text then echoes the language of "The White Negro" when it locates Baldwin's literary potential in his experience as "one of the most tortured and magical nerves of our time," a phrasing that expresses his fascination with Baldwin alluding to his experience of being Black and queer. And yet: the perfume, the two denigrating references to sexual identity and habitus suggest that what keeps Baldwin from achieving the status of a major writer is precisely his homosexuality. If the text marks Baldwin as "too charming," it marks him as effeminate. Mailer's "quick and expensive comments on the talent in the room" are costly because they threaten friendships. In Mailer's framework of celebrity authorship and cutting-edge literati, however, they are "expensive" in a different sense as well. They are a gift of literary friendship: "Norman Mailer" writes "James Baldwin" to the effect of enhanced publicity and field recognition. The art of the insult embraces the dictum that bad press is good press because of the weight

ascribed to the celebrity author position. The other self, “Baldwin,” is at the service of the self-aggrandizing signature “Mailer,” and hence a mere externalization. Against Mailer’s cockiness, though, his own signature does no less profit from Baldwin’s, which symbolically owns the peripheries of difference, something Baldwin implies in his reply.

In “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” Baldwin narrates his reading experience of Mailer’s insults. Back in Paris, he met up with his white writer friends James Jones and William Styron, likewise targets of Mailer’s typewriting. Together, they read “in a kind of drunken, masochistic fascination, Norman’s judgment of our personalities and our work” (Baldwin [1961] 1998, p. 281). The double judgment of who and how one is and what and how one writes—the definition of the art of the insult, where both cannot be separated—leaves Baldwin insecure, “to tell the truth, my feelings were hurt,” and wondering “if that was the way Norman felt about me” (ibid.). Were the insults part of the game of field positioning enacted on paper, or were they a genuine expression of homophobic resentment? At first, there was anger: “He said that I was incapable of saying ‘F—you’ to the reader. My first temptation was to send him a cablegram which would disabuse him of that notion, at least insofar as one reader was concerned” (ibid.). While Baldwin, by writing about what he did not telegram, writes it nonetheless in his love letter, he also notes that he controlled the impulse and kept his “cool,” the idiom reserved in Black American vernacular for holding back one’s anger in the face of racist offenses, and thus for not risking to be perceived as an “angry Black man.” But the actual stake is slightly different:

“Did [Mailer] really suppose that he had now become the builder and destroyer of reputations,

And of *my* reputation?” (ibid.)

The separation of the line that specifically concerns Baldwin’s own reputation is key. Mailer, assuming the role of the judge, had attacked Baldwin doubly: as a writer, who would presumably not meet the standards of fulfilling his talents, an anxiety Baldwin recounts in his text, and he had exposed his sexuality in the code of charm and perfume. The inaugural scene of a coming out, which would be crucial to gay identity discourse and life stories starting in the 1970s, was not yet an acknowledged option circa 1960. With his homophobic and emasculating language, Mailer had put Baldwin at risk by exposing what could only be socially accepted as an open secret.

Importantly, though, they meet up in a bar and reconcile when Baldwin confronts him: “‘Why did you write those things about me?’” The way Baldwin frames Mailer’s answer is intriguing: “‘Well, I’ll tell you about that,’ he said—Norman has several accents, and I think this was his Texas one—‘I sort of figured you had it coming’” (ibid.). Having Mailer imitate Southernness, Baldwin casts him in another role, a revenant of Faulkner, yet another insult, given Mailer’s attempt to distinguish himself in “The Sixth Advertisement for Myself.” On Mailer’s end, the implication, though, seems to be that Baldwin had risen to public prominence and, because of that, deserved the privilege of an offensive takedown. When Baldwin asks why he did not express his feelings to his face, indicating that the written insult risked their friendship, he has Mailer reply: “‘Well, I figured if this was going to break up our friendship, something else would come along to break it up just as fast,’” to which Baldwin adds: “I couldn’t disagree with that” (ibid., p. 282). On the one hand, friendships here are far from Montaigne’s and Thoreau’s fateful idealizations. Though enabled and framed by literati connections, they are presented as the result of chance encounters. On the other hand, if Podhoretz presents the falling out with his “ex-friends” as the result of putting ideological differences in writing, Baldwin and Mailer agree that friendships can and should stomach written insults but need face-to-face encounters for reassurance.

The breaking point lies elsewhere. It is Mailer's run for public office: "And then I heard that Norman was running for mayor [...]. I thought, You son of a bitch, you're copping out. You're one of the very few writers around who might really become a great writer, who might help excavate the buried consciousness of this country, and you want to settle for being the lousy mayor of New York. *It's not your job*" (ibid., p. 283; emphases in original). Against Szalay's case for the blending of literary hip and the Democratic Party, Baldwin, following field logic, insists on the necessity of separating politics and literature. Using a colloquial expletive, the text shows Baldwin finally losing his cool when Mailer opts to suspend his professional identity as a writer and pulls a publicity stunt by running for public office, a campaign intended as a satire of both media and politics. Baldwin here returns the compliment that was hidden in Mailer's assault, marking him as "a great writer," to the extent that he would lay open the cultural and political unconscious of the nation. Crucially, the identity as a writer, echoing Baldwin's opening narration about the writer in crisis "fighting for his life," is presented as something more than a role performance: "I do not think, if one is a writer, that one escapes it by trying to become something else. One does *not* become something else: one becomes nothing" (ibid.; emphasis original). Again, this cites the discourse of the writerly profession as a vocation but gives it a Sartrean existentialist drift. It is a calling that projects an identity so powerful and essential that it cannot be denied and must be realized. One cannot switch sides. This would mean betraying "a writer's responsibility" (ibid.). Baldwin, then, can condone Mailer's textual transgressions and literary insults because he accepts their shared identity as writers with a calling to provoke and to test limits by performing roles. His love letter declares love for their shared identity as literati and for a tacit agreement about literary license, an important element of his poetics of identity, unrecognized by scholarship. The betrayal of this love, by implication, would suspend the potential of literary desegregation and run the risk of cementing the social order of segregation.

4. Reputations

But Baldwin's pontifications on the responsibility of the writer, his concern with reputations, and the like, which echo Mailer's, have their sad limits. They are exposed in the treatment of what Baldwin describes as "the events at that monstrous, baffling, and so publicized party" (ibid., p. 284), alluding to Mailer's stabbing of his wife, to which the love letter alludes in closing without naming Adele again. To be sure, the unnamed "events" lead him to wonder: "One can never really see into the heart, the mind, the soul of another. Norman is my very good friend, but perhaps I do not really understand him at all, and perhaps everything I have tried to suggest in the foregoing is false" (ibid.). But the assertion of a "very good" friendship complements the pronouncements surrounding these expressed doubts about knowing someone as they are when all roles and masks fall: "the price one pays for pursuing any profession, any calling, is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side" (ibid.). Underlying the small scandals of uncensored printed offense in the name of symbolic and linguistic violence, we thus find an attempt at censoring an act of physical violence on behalf of the vocational literati who closed ranks.

When it comes to accounts of the stabbing, there is a discrepancy between Mailer biographers and scholars who read Mailer's texts and position him vis-à-vis other writers. If Peter Manso reconstructs the events in great detail by printing and reprinting various eyewitness statements and documents (cf. [Manso 1985](#), pp. 307–35), including some of Adele's remarks, it is fair to say that this context has been neglected in scholarship that tends to rest with Baldwin–Mailer in the context of race and sexualities. "My Norman Mailer Problem—and Ours," to quote the title of Darryl Pinckney's representative essay ([Pinckney 2022](#)), which riffs on Podhoretz's "My Negro Problem—and Ours," might run

deeper than that. In a recent account of the Baldwin–Mailer friendship, Louis Menand reminds us of the stabbing, which was much publicized at the time. Mailer had thrown a party, not least to announce his planned bid for the office of New York Mayor. In the morning hours of 20 November 1960, Adele “taunted” her drunk husband, who had been in a combative mood all night, and “called him a faggot” (Menand 2021, p. 557). Presumably in reaction to this insult on his sexuality, cast in a homophobic signifier, Mailer “stabbed her twice with a penknife, in the back and in the abdomen,” with one stab puncturing “the membrane around her heart” (ibid.). Menand is blunt about the event’s disturbing implications: “The stabbing seems to have enhanced Mailer’s social and literary cachet” (ibid., p. 559).

The painter Adele Morales, who published her memoir *The Last Party: Scenes from my Life with Norman Mailer* (1997) as Adele Mailer, recalls that during the day leading up to the party, Mailer kept inviting unknown people from the streets, where he campaigned intoxicated. She writes that a “black stranger” (A. Mailer 1997, p. 350), whom Mailer had scooped up earlier on the streets, tried to help her. “I felt Norman kick me. ‘Get away from her, let the bitch die’” (ibid.). The racializing emphasis on the “black stranger,” who gets in a fistfight with the misogynist Mailer over his attempt to help, makes this scene an intriguing comment when contextualized by the author’s projections onto Black Americans. It shows a type of civic courage he never conceded in his fantasies of street violence, excited Black minds, and orgasmic masculinity. Mailer stalked his wife in the hospital after her operation, trying to persuade her in vain to fabricate the story of an accident rather than tell the truth. Without fully realizing it, Faulkner, in his reply to Mailer as quoted above, may have been on to something after all. If the hipster is a psychopath, as Mailer suggested in “The White Negro,” this story has one psychopath, Norman Mailer, a symptomatic figure of the cultural moment circa 1960. Retrospectively, he conceived himself in these symptomatic terms to legitimize his act of violence. A comment to James Atlas for a *New York Times* magazine feature, written on the occasion of Mailer’s triumphant return with his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Executioner’s Song*, suggests as much: “a decade’s anger made me do it. After that, I felt better” (Atlas 1979). The repressive cultural ferment and the various rebellions against it, which the intellectuals and literati claimed to spearhead, produced him and his violent actions.

For a moment, after the stabbing, Mailer’s choice was to go to jail or be institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. Norman Podhoretz, who was present at the party but did not witness the physical assault, appeared to have been Mailer’s confidant when he at first hid from the police. As Podhoretz recounts in *Ex-Friends*, Mailer wanted “to extract a promise from me that I would do everything in my power to keep them from committing him to an asylum.” He writes that Mailer, by his own account, “would rather go to jail than be institutionalized, [...] because if he were deemed insane his work would never be taken seriously again” (Podhoretz 2000, p. 201). The celebration of psychopathology in “The White Negro” runs up against the social reality where straitjackets, electroshock therapy, and even lobotomy were in standard use. Once the literati are indeed diagnosed as mentally ill, their reputation is on the line. Notably, the history of the mental asylum is gendered: women were disproportionately assigned to such institutions and subjected to experimental treatments. Mailer’s fear of losing his reputation as a writer here met the unacknowledged fear of losing, yet again, his precious masculinity.

Eventually, and quite scandalously, Mailer was neither institutionalized nor imprisoned. He got away, and to no small degree, the literati played their part. “Now began,” Adele Mailer writes ominously, “what must have been a complex plan to make sure Norman didn’t serve any time in prison” (A. Mailer 1997, p. 360). While several friends advised her to press charges, “the so-called intellectuals and writers [...] who were so afraid for

their reputations” that they had fled the crime scene once the police had arrived, “were shoving a petition under my nose;” they echoed “the same old litany, what a tragedy it was for him, great writer, brilliant, blah, blah, blah” (ibid., p. 363). Once again, the pursuit of literary greatness, in the discourse of the literati, needs to be protected as a self-legitimizing narrative at all costs. One would like to return to playing the art of the insult, cultivate the collective reputation as cultural provocateurs, and forget about the intrusion of reality in the form of physical injury.

Much could be said about the paper trail in newspapers and magazines on how the stabbing was framed. It tended to be presented in literary terms as a necessity to forge the persona of the radical artist who manages to close the gap between literature and life, the old dream of the historical avant-garde, as elaborated by Bürger (1984). Atlas, for instance, writes in his feature: “The Greek drama Mailer had made of his life demanded a peripeteia, some dramatic incident to salvage the slow decline of his career” (Atlas 1979). The plots of life need to be told as the plots of a Greek tragedy. In the immediate aftermath of the stabbing, two contributions to *TIME* stick out. On 5 December 1960, under the rubric “Americana,” the magazine published a piece titled “Of Time & the Rebel.” Recounting the events of the party, it declared, once again in a phrasing that blurs the lines between life and literature, that “the story Mailer wrote and lived was mostly a story of repeated failures” (Americana: Of Time & the Rebel 1960, p. 17). Three weeks later, on 26 December 1960, *TIME* printed a two-sentence-long letter to the editors, co-authored by Baldwin, Podhoretz, Lillian Hellman, and others, in which they take issue with the previous piece. They object to the story’s “assurance that the critical reputation of Norman Mailer has declined since *The Naked and the Dead*.” Speaking for “[m]any critics and fellow writers,” they not only hold that “Mailer’s work is of continuing significance and brilliance;” they assert “that he is one of the few young writers who have not ‘fallen hard’” (Baldwin et al. 1960, p. 2), an expression they quote from the earlier piece.

The closing of ranks is as noteworthy as the discourse in whose name it happens. Censoring the scandal of the stabbing, the literati bestow upon Mailer a discourse of continued cultural relevance and literary greatness. To that end, the art of the insult was merely a game with which the literati legitimized themselves in their daring brilliance. By implication, they claim to have moved their initially perceived peripheral status as outsiders to the center of the literary field. Their letter of correction and support, written strictly in the name of their self-proclaimed function as literati, inadvertently, or not, positioned Mailer at the center of their group. They spoke in his name and on his behalf, tying their fate to his. If Mailer’s reputation was at stake, theirs was too—more than they were aware of, one should say in retrospect. If Mailer had to fear the loss of relevance, they had to fear the fall into obscurity. “His work, after all,” writes Baldwin near the end of his love letter, “is all that will be left when the newspapers are yellowed, all the gossip columnists silenced, and all the cocktail parties over, and when Norman and you and I are dead” (Baldwin [1961] 1998, pp. 284–85). It is nothing short of scandalous how these self-proclaimed provocateurs circa 1960 kept falling back into worn tropes of Romantic literary transcendence to legitimize non-literary assault and violence. They did so in the name of a neo-avant-garde posture of innovation by provocation, simultaneously endowed with lasting literary value beyond death. “The Family,” to recall Podhoretz, remained intact, and Mailer was not excommunicated.

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