The two of them met in a living room in Paris in 1956.

James Baldwin was 32. Norman Mailer, a year older. And yet, in the few weeks they spent roaming the streets of Paris, the younger Baldwin would describe Norman as a “gladiator,” someone whom he envied because of “his youth, and his love.”

Immediately, there was an infatuation. Or at least, an affinity. Whatever it was, it was mutual. Mailer and his then-wife Adele admired Baldwin, and Baldwin admired them. Of their time in Paris, Mailer would later reflect: “I don't think there was anyone in the literary world who was more beloved than Jimmy.”

They were writers in Paris. Drinking and fighting and pontificating through the city. It was romantic, but short-lived. Within weeks, Mailer and his wife would return to the U.S. And shortly after, Baldwin would leave for Corsica. For a year, they exchanged letters, vaguely.

And then Mailer published “The White Negro” in 1957.
In these pages, Mailer attempted to define a subculture of American existentialists, whom he termed “hipsters.” He equated the psychopathic hipster with the everyday Negro, for both, he insisted, existed in a world of danger and violence and war. And in this world of chaos, only deviance makes sense. Mailer writes:

Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm, it is the music of orgasm, good orgasm and bad, and so it spoke across a nation, it had the communication of art even where it was watered, perverted, corrupted, and almost killed, it spoke in no matter what laundered popular way of instantaneous existential states to which some whites could respond, it was indeed a communication by art because it said, “I feel this, and now you do too.”

Jazz is orgasm, Mailer informs us.
To say that Mailer was intrigued by black sexuality would be to say the sky is blue. Before publishing “The White Negro,” Mailer was tossing around his thoughts on the matter in correspondence with friends. In one piece that he sent around for criticism, he expressed his belief that white men’s fear of black men’s sexual “superiority” could explain a good deal of white racial hatred.

Superiority. Mailer, and Baldwin to an extent, both felt superior in many ways (in comparison to much of the world, but not necessarily in comparison to one another – at least not in the beginning of their relationship). They were talented writers who lusted after fame. Perhaps this is where things fell apart.

For Mailer, life was a competition. For Baldwin, it was a survival. Mailer was always ready for a fight, even begged for them (he once stabbed Adele and was known for participating in head-butting contests). Baldwin, thin and barely 5 feet 6 inches tall, was not as eager to tussle. But if painted into a corner, he would lash out. He was too proud to be humiliated. When he was a teen, he threw a glass of water at a white waitress for refusing him service in a restaurant he knew would never serve him. If challenged, Baldwin would fight back.
In 1959, Mailer’s challenge to Baldwin arrived. It arrived in the form of the massive (and massively) self-involved *Advertisements for Myself*. In this tome, Mailer, more or less, declared himself the hottest thing in the literary world. And in doing so, he dragged down a coterie of other writers, one paragraph at a time. Baldwin was one of those writers he trashed.

Mailer, on Baldwin in *Advertisements*:

James Baldwin is too charming a writer to be major […] even the best of his paragraphs are sprayed with perfume. Baldwin seems incapable of saying ‘F—you’ to the reader […] 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. If he ever climbs the mountain, and really tells it, we will have a testament, and not a noble toilet water. Until then he is doomed to be minor.

These were fighting words, certainly. Gossip, practically.
Baldwin responded to Mailer’s challenge in *Esquire* in 1961 with the piece “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy.” This was, he assured his readers, a love letter to Norman. It read like a letter of unrequited love.

About “The White Negro” Baldwin wrote:

> But why should it be necessary to borrow the Depression language of deprived Negroes, which eventually evolved into jive and bop talk, in order to justify such a grim system of delusions? Why malign the sorely menaced sexuality of Negroes in order to justify the white man’s own sexual panic?

And about Mailer, he wrote:

> …the great gap between Norman’s state and my own had a terrible effect on our relationship, for it inevitably connected, not to say collided, with that myth of the sexuality of Negroes which Norman, like so many others, refuses to give up. The sexual battleground, if I may call it that…

Sometime before all of this, Norman once said to Baldwin, most likely over a drink or ten: “I want to know how power works. How it really works, in detail.” Baldwin replied that he understood how power worked, for if he didn’t, he would be dead. For Norman, this was all still a game. For Baldwin, this was still survival.

As Norman saw it, man-to-man dueling worked like this:

> You are considered important by some and put down by others, and every time you meet a new man, the battle is on: the latest guest has to decide if you are
(a) stronger than he, and

(b) smarter than he, and

(c) less queer.

And if you pass on all three counts, if you win the arm-wrestle, culture derby and short-hair count, well then if he is a decent sort he usually feels you should run for President. But all this has happened in the first place because your reputation is uncertain, your name is locked in the elevators of publicity and public fashion, and so your meetings with every man and woman around become charged and overcharged.

Baldwin’s sexuality probably mattered to Mailer, how much we cannot be sure. According to Mailer, Baldwin was a man of “charm,” “perfume,” “detachment,” and “magic” – tropes lazily affixed to a bisexual writer. Baldwin, then, lost the game (if Mailer’s rules were to apply) before he even begun to play.

In all of this, Mailer could not grasp that the world was changing. Change, in Baldwin’s analysis, was the hetero white man’s apocalypse. Baldwin writes: “I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream, unfailingly and unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives.”

Baldwin never thought himself to be good-looking and before the publication of his first novel (Go Tell It on the Mountain) he was listless, worried, and uncertain. He borrowed money from anyone and everyone and spent it all on booze and parties. Baldwin was insecure.
But Baldwin admitted to his insecurity. And Baldwin’s insecurity was rooted in an understanding of the role society had imagined for him – the role of a despised, queer, black man. His insecurity, even his want for fame, could never compare to Mailer’s grandiose and oft-blind ego. Mailer was always running for President.

In a 1984 interview in *The New York Times*, Julius Lester, also a black writer, asked Baldwin about Mailer. Lester and Baldwin’s exchange:

Lester: We were talking about white writers as witnesses and you alluded to Mailer. How do you see Mailer?

Baldwin: Well, Mailer is something I’ve been desperately trying to avoid. *(Laughs)* All I can say is that - well, one of the hazards of being an American writer, and I’m well placed to know it, is that eventually you have nothing to write about. A funny thing happens on the way to the typewriter. There is a decidedly grave danger of becoming a celebrity, of becoming a star, of becoming a personality. Again, I’m very well placed to know that. It’s symptomatic of the society that doesn’t have any real respect for the artist. You’re either a success or a failure and there’s nothing in between. And if you are a success, you run the risk that Norman has run and that I run, too, of becoming a kind of show business personality. Then the legend becomes far more important than the work. It’s as though you’re living in an echo chamber. You hear only your own voice. And, when you become a celebrity, that voice is magnified by multitudes and you begin to drown in this endless duplication of what looks like yourself. You have to be really very lucky, and very stubborn, not to let that happen to you. It’s a difficult trap to avoid. And that’s part of Norman’s dilemma, I think. A writer is supposed to write. If he appears on television or as a public speaker, so much the better or so much the worse, but the public persona is one thing. On the public platform or on television, I have to sound as if I know what I’m talking about. It’s antithetical to the effort you make at the typewriter, where you don’t know a damned thing. And you have to know you don’t know it. The moment you carry the persona to the typewriter, you are finished. Does that answer your question?

Lester: No, but it’s an eloquent evasion.

Baldwin: Is it? But I don’t want to talk about Norman! Why should I talk about Norman? I’m very fond of him and have great respect for his gifts. Well, perhaps he’s a perfect example of what it means to be a white writer in this century, a white American writer in this country. It affords too many opportunities to avoid reality. . . . And I know much more about Norman than I’m willing to say in print. After all, I care about him.

For Baldwin, Mailer’s blindness – his avoidance of reality – was the problem.

At the very end of *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin writes: “this world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” This sentence, no doubt, startled many of Baldwin’s white, mid-20th century readers. Within this sentence, is the gap and the battleground of misunderstanding between Baldwin and Mailer.
What Mailer didn’t understand was that it was time to grow up. What he didn’t understand was that it was time to stop trying to out-man the competition, to stop pathologizing black sexuality and to start playing the real game of life. It was time for Mailer, and the rest of the world, to trade fear for love.

Baldwin died in 1987. To the end, he cared about Mailer.

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