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THE ACCUMULATED ROCK OF AGES
Questions of identity in James Baldwin's early fiction

by

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Introduction

I first decided to write about James Baldwin for my senior thesis in the spring of 2007. For the most part, this pronouncement was made blindly, based only on the indecipherable emotional reaction I had to *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and then again upon reading *Notes of a Native Son.* There was something contained in Baldwin's words that sparked within me a sense of urgency, both individually and as part of various communities from which I amass my identity, family, Wesleyan, Middletown, America, humanity. This "something" has remained nameless even as Baldwin's work has since grown in urgency.

At the time of my decision to write on Baldwin, the Wesleyan community was entering a time of flux. A new campus center had been built and would open in the fall promising to change the face of campus. President Michael Roth was set to be ushered in at the start of my third and final year at Wesleyan.[1] Throughout our college community there reverberated feelings of excitement and possibility, and also immediacy; if there were ever a time to demand more change, it was now.

For my own part, this was the point in my Wesleyan career where I finally began making sense of campus dynamics that had previously eluded me. Deep into

[1] I transferred to Wesleyan at the start of my sophomore year.

my African American Studies major, I had developed a heightened awareness of the vehicles through which students exercise power and negotiate identity on campus. Race, gender and sexuality were the rallying cries for those too often silenced by the white, male, heteronormative regime with which I had become so familiar. "Reject the binary" soon became my catch-phrase and unpacking years of unacknowledged white privilege, my occupation. I was rewarded for my efforts through acquiring the ability to hold the experiential "truth" of identity in perfect tension with the "truth" of its socially constructed and historically contingent nature. However, when applied outside the theoretical landscape of my mind and its home in the classroom, the usefulness of such ability seemed to dissipate.

In quoting Thomas Holt, Robert Reid-Pharr describes this phenomenon in the introduction to his recent book, *Once You Go Black*, that

> it is now commonplace for American intellectuals to stress the socially constructed nature of all manner of identity formations. The problem that Holt rightly points to, however, is that though this constructivist mode is universally recognized as correct inside American universities, it is rather embarrassingly absent from the discussions of "race" [and implicitly other forms of identity] that take place outside of academia, including those that significantly affect social policy.[2]

I became preoccupied with this tension. My frustration grew as I continually failed to see how the perceived "unreality" of this social construction could ever find its way into the political and cultural realities of people's lives. For it seemed to me that this was the effort being made by my classmates in forming LGBTQ groups, holding people of color dinners, having discussion panels to discuss how race operates on campus and creating seminars on whiteness. I have found however, that while these

[2] Robert Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual (New York: New York University Press, 2007) 10.

spaces yield the fruitful and far from unimportant results of increased awareness and dialogue, in the end they also serve to solidify boundaries rather than explode them.

Again, Reid-Pharr articulates this paradox in regard to those involved – as I am – in the study of Black American history and culture. He writes, "We risk either conceding to outmoded and regressive ways of thinking about human identity and diversity or devaluing as "unreal" or "immaterial" a history and culture that many of us take to be precious."[3] As a solution to this dilemma, Reid-Pharr returns to Holt who suggests that, in relation to race in the American context we must purge ourselves of the notion of a "universal, transhistorical 'blackness'" that encompasses the realities of every individual who has been labeled and/or self-identifies as such. Additionally, I would argue that in purging an authentic blackness we must also purge the notion of universal or transhistorical categories such as "woman" or "gay." For in universalizing one or more of these identities and/or taking them out of their particular historical framework we lose sight of their relationship to one another. Indeed, as we see on the Wesleyan campus and in other contexts, progress has been made to articulate more and more complicated and overlapping identity narratives. Yet, "it is simply not the case that these particular iterations are the only narratives that are possible."[4]

Still, last year at this time, there existed no national platform upon which one could appeal to this type of "purging" and in turn make room to create other narratives. That however, was beginning to change. Just as our Wesleyan community was shifting leadership and identity, America too, was poised for transition. Entering

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[3] Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual 11.
[4] Ibid.

into its eighth and final year under the leadership of a President whose name will forever be associated with such life-altering events as September 11, Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq War, this country stood at a historical precipice. These events and the Presidency that was shaped by them brought to the forefront of a national and global consciousness questions regarding the future of American identity. Emerging from this moment came two unlikely candidates for President. In January and February of 2007 respectively, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama announced their intentions to run for the 2008 election. As I write these words in April of 2008 it remains undecided which candidate, the white woman or the black man, will be making a run for President on the Democratic ticket.

Throughout both their campaigns, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have been victims of countless (mis)interpretations surrounding their gendered and/or racial identities. During the primaries, Clinton was filmed "crying" during a press conference which sparked questions regarding whether it served to "humanize" her to the American public or made her appear weak. Either way, what implicitly lies at stake within this line of questioning is not Clinton's humanness, but her femaleness.

Since the announcement of Obama's intention to run, the media and popular discussion has relentlessly sought to solidify his identity through reinscribing age old narratives based on the authenticity of blackness. With a black Kenyan father and a white Kansas-born mother, Obama has been labeled either too black or not black enough. Until recently, Obama has avoided the question of race himself and focused his campaign in other areas. Yet, comments made by a pastor with whom he is

affiliated that are being read as "unpatriotic" and evoking "black separatism," have forced Obama to address race in America explicitly.[5]

On March 18, 2008 in Philadelphia, Obama gave a speech which George Packer of *The New Yorker* describes as having the "personal drama, the encompassing structure, the moral and intellectual intricacy, of a great essay."[6] In it, Obama criticizes the comments of Reverend Wright while affirming the reality of the history that has brought forth such sentiments. He offers a new narrative of American identity not based on the "outmoded and regressive" rhetoric of essentialism. By appealing to a history of successive generations "willing to do their part…to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time," Obama characterizes the American narrative as a work in progress.[7]

The story of mismatched ideals in relation to reality is the story of this country. It is a story that gets repeated over and over again, though the realities continue to change. As Obama says of Wrights comments, "The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made."[8]

One does not need to learn much about the harsh realities faced by many in this country in order to understand Reverend Wright's sentiment. Racial ideas that have propagated throughout our nation's history continue to be restated, only (but not always) in more "politically correct" terms. Nevertheless, it also remains true that

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[5] For ABC New's coverage of this story and video clips of Reverend Wright's sermons in question go to: http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/Story?id=4443788.
[6] George Packer, "Native Son," The New Yorker March 31 2008. The essay to which he likened the speech specifically was (as one could guess from the title) Baldwin's *Notes of Native Son.*
[7] http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/samgrahamfelsen/gGBbKG
[8] Ibid.

new insights into identity and experience arise every day to betray the inadequacy of yesterday's language.

The 2008 Democratic nomination race itself "begs the question of historical change and continuity."[9] A white woman and a black man face off for the chance to run for the highest office in the land. This race thus far has done more than highlight the fissures that have divided the Democratic Party along lines of singular identity groups since the sixties. The possibility that, for the first time, a white, male face will not be the representative face of the United States brings much more far reaching questions of identity and representation to the surface in ways not seen for over forty years.

It is with this spirit that I have come to understand the urgency of what I perceived in the work of James Baldwin a year ago. Aside from my own interest, there has been a resurgence of scholarship on Baldwin over the course of the last decade. Reasons for this have mostly to do with the emergence since Baldwin's death of what Dwight McBride refers to as "cultural studies." In the introduction to his anthology on Baldwin, McBride claims that

> With the advent of cultural studies, it is finally possible to understand Baldwin's vision of and for humanity in its complexity, locating him not as exclusively gay, black, expatriate, activist, or the like but as an intricately negotiated amalgam of all of those things, which had to be constantly tailored to fit the circumstances in which he was compelled to articulate himself.[10]

There is no doubt that bringing Baldwin out of one of the categories of identity that scholarship has relegated him – as McBride claims his collection does – will help to open up our thinking about African American culture and individuals. My

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[9] Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual 11.
[10] Dwight A. McBride, ed., James Baldwin Now (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

own work, in fact grounds itself in this effort. However, I argue that "Baldwin's vision of and for humanity" goes well beyond merely the recognition of complex identities that takes place at LGBTQ meetings, people of color dinners and so on. Adding or appropriating more "socially constructed" labels into one's identity does not necessarily disrupt the power dynamics of the society in which they were created. Hence, while uncovering Baldwin as an "amalgam of all those things" is necessary, it subsequently fails to acknowledge Baldwin's attempts to reinvent the very framework from which American identity is constituted. As he writes, "I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but, I am, also, much more than that. So are we all."[11]

Barack Obama echoes this sentiment when speaking of his mixed racial and geographic heritage: "It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one."[12] Rather than mere political lip service, this statement is an articulation of what Reid-Pharr calls the "forced choice" with which the Black American must wrestle. This choice, he writes, becomes

> a sort of (Black) American patriotism, a recognition that by necessity one must throw in one's lot with the oppressors, "the whites," because, in fact, these oppressors are not only one's compatriots but also in a sense one's ancestors and one's progeny.[13]

In this light, Reid-Pharr and Obama can be seen as following in the revolutionary pathway Baldwin laid out so many years before. It is revolutionary

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[11] James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) xii.
[12] http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/samgrahamfelsen/gGBbKG
[13] Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual 9.

because of the risks involved. Both sentiments take seriously Baldwin's words when he says: "It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality."[14] This is no tame or shallow notion. For to work towards first recognizing and then acting on the kind of radical unity that would strip the unspoken norm of its oppressive power would be a continuous struggle. Moreover, (and perhaps more dauntingly) it would undoubtedly also spell an end to blackness as well as all other categories of identity we assume to be so profoundly distinct.[15]

Contrary to the opinion of contemporary critics like McBride then, it is neither Baldwin's identity – amalgamated or singular – nor the rise of cultural studies that has made his writing take on new meaning for our specific political and historical context. Instead, as David Roediger claims, it is how the attention Baldwin paid "to power, to property, to work, to tragedy, to culture, to terror, to gender, to sexuality, to variety, to complexity, to contradiction, and to change informed his deep and persistent inquires" into what it means to be American that compels me in turning to him now.[16]

What follows is an in-depth analysis of Baldwin's first three novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country* and the criticism that

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[14] Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son 21.
[15] Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual 32. This "radical unity" would not mean the absolution of difference, but rather a shift in the way we conceptualize of difference. Reid-Pharr, for instance, deploys the rhetoric of freedom of choice that has surrounded issues of feminism and sexuality to suggest that one could choose – or not choose – one's "race." Obama concurs when he says, "We have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism…or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, 'Not this time.'" Baldwin's own vision will get expounded upon in the following chapters.
[16] David R. Roediger, ed., Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White (New York: Schocken Books, 1998) 21.

accompanies them. My task is primarily one of scholarly critique in which I will be looking at a range of pieces written on these works and offering my own counter-readings. I have chosen Baldwin's fiction not because I find it more valuable or of higher literary quality than his essays but because the critical response it evokes is much more revealing of how the politics of representation function in American society. Critics, contemporary and past, have tended to marginalize Baldwin's fiction as they marginalized his complex identity. Whether through emphasizing his essays or refusing to incorporate his novels into the history of black literary culture, the propensity has been to regard his fiction as mere catharsis; void of any real social implications.

On the contrary, I will look to uncover the potentialities that exist within Baldwin's fiction for informing contemporary conversations concerning intersections of race, gender and sexuality. Throughout, I do my best to resist falling back on an assumption of Baldwin's identity in order to critique his art. Taking my linguistic cue from queer theory in its suggestion that all identity categories are necessarily performative and precarious, I will be confronting these readings of Baldwin's early novels that insist on their representational rather than revolutionary purposes. In doing so, I am responding to the challenge issued by Siobhan B. Somerville in *Queering the Color Line* to recognize "the instability of multiple categories of difference simultaneously rather than assuming the fixity of one to establish the complexity of another." Baldwin's fiction has been particularly victimized by our temptation to divide "texts – like bodies – according to a mistaken logic of

transparent racial or sexual identity."[17] It has been upon Baldwin's assumed racial and/or sexual identity that his fictional texts have been categorized, hence making the practice all the more troubling. For, as we shall see, the texts themselves resist such easy classifications.

In the first chapter on *Go Tell It on the Mountain* I call for a reading that acknowledges the risks Baldwin took in writing what has since been considered his most "authentic" and implicitly "appropriate" novel. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* has made its way into the African American literary canon through serving as an example of when Baldwin still wrote "close to his roots." I wish to problematize this reading in pointing to the ambiguous themes present in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* that actually provide the foundation upon which he builds his two subsequent and much more "controversial" novels.

A tale of two (ostensibly white) male lovers in Paris, *Giovanni's Room* has proved to be quite a conundrum for literary scholars, white and black. To offer a cast of only white characters (particularly as a black writer) is to bring to light the assumption that it is the presence of blackness that makes race an issue at stake. The whiteness of David, Baldwin's protagonist, prevents his struggle with same-sex desire to be linked in any way to his racial identity. As Marlon Ross writes, "The two lovers, David and Giovanni, are specific instances of individuals with representative (white?) problems that need human (white?) solutions."[18]

In my reading of *Giovanni's Room,* I rely heavily but diverge sharply from Marlon Ross' piece, "White Fantasies of Desire" and Cora Kaplan's "A Cavern

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[17] Siobhan B. Somerville, Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 5.
[18] Marlon Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," James Baldwin Now, ed. Dwiight McBride (1999) 25.

Opened in My Mind: The Poetics of Homosexuality and the Politics of Masculinity in James Baldwin." Using Judith Butler's conception of drag, I assert that the presence of the feminized grotesque that Kaplan claims is a manifestation of Baldwin's repulsion to "freaks and females," instead provides a useful enactment of the performative nature of gender. Moreover, it serves as a reflection of how the novel itself performs a sort of drag among literary scholarship.

Another Country, Baldwin's first "integrated" novel, has been subjected to a broad spectrum of criticism. From those who see the "sex" of the novel as an unnecessary distraction from its political possibilities, to those who praise Baldwin for writing a novel that displays the possibilities of artistic transcendence that can be reached via sexual awakening, it has been a sorely misread novel. To make matters worse, Rufus, the main and only black male character, commits suicide after the first eighty pages of the four hundred page novel has sparked criticism from all factions. In light of these difficulties I seek to redeem some of these readings in arguing that *Another Country* is a decidedly queer text. Rufus's suicide, the theme of bisexuality, and the ambiguous nature of its revelatory moments makes the novel – like his first two – a work that, for all its limitations, is well ahead of its time.

"I'm on my way"
Ambiguous themes and authorial risks in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

In the eyes of literary critics old and new, James Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is his most brilliant work of fiction. The common sentiment remains that his career as a novelist began and ended with this work. In a *New York Times* review published the year after the novel's release, Orville Prescott "praised" its ornate biblical language and eloquent dialogue – "colloquial but not so extreme as to seem like a dialect."[19] He, along with most other reviewers claimed that it was a novel primarily about "the role of a primitive, naïve and frequently hysterical variety of religion in the lives of American Negroes."[20] Even more remarkable than Prescott's belief that this was a novel primarily about "Negro" religion is his belief in its lack of social commentary:

> It is concentrated on the minds and emotions and relationships of a half dozen characters and makes no attempt to indict society because of race prejudice, as do most novels by Negro writers.[21]

Much of this type of discussion stemmed from whether or not *Go Tell It on the Mountain* could be linked with the tradition of black protest fiction taking shape at the time. Baldwin continually expressed the desire to be set apart from this tradition

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[19] Orville Prescott, "Books of the Times," New York Times May 19, 1953: 4-5.
[20] Prescott, "Books of the Times."
[21] Prescott, "Books of the Times."

he believed to be "propagandist." Hence, one could say critics were merely taking him at his word. Yet, it is easy to forget that in 1952 the possibilities for black novelists were severely limited. Writers like Richard Wright and to some extent Chester Himes were among the first to write novels that, to borrow Prescott's language, "indicted society because of race prejudice" and did so unapologetically. Baldwin's desire to distance himself from this type of writing was borne out of a yearning for intellectual and literary freedom and honesty. Writing and/or labeling a work of fiction as "political protest" (or conversely, "just art") severely limits the possibilities of both the novel and the author's imagination. Baldwin recognized and tried to avert this danger in 1952, but this destructive labeling has only been rearticulated in contemporary Baldwin scholarship.

Shirley Allen, writing in 1975, focuses in on Baldwin's extensive Biblical symbolism to argue that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* stands apart from the likes of *Invisible Man* and *Native Son* in that the "major conflict of the novel is not black against white, but the more universal problem of a youth achieving maturity."[22] Thirty years later, a 2005 review by Robert Lashley, echoes the same reading. Lashley believes that the greatness of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is found in Baldwin's ability to "take subtle shared experiences of African American life and make them beautifully human and undeniably powerful."[23]

One does not need to disagree with Allen or Lashley to understand such conclusions as sorely misguided. Implicitly, both are claiming that "finding the

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[22] Shirley S. Allen, "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," CLA Journal 19 (1975): 173.
[23] Robert Lashley, "Book Review: James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain," Blogcritics Magazine (2005), vol.

universal in the African American experience" means that Baldwin is involved in humanizing blacks (as if black life is otherwise something sub-human or super-human) in order for whites to relate to and empathize with them. For the assumption on the part of liberal, tolerant whites was and continues to be that if only racist white America would see in their darker brothers and sisters a shared humanity we could all move forward and achieve the democratic promise of America.

It is, of course, true that Baldwin communicates the universal in the personal; all good writers do and should. What is telling is the sort of praise is offered only in writings on *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* All of Baldwin's succeeding novels it seems have no universal appeal (though, as we shall see, they in many ways pick up where *Go Tell It on the Mountain* leaves off). This is due to the assumption that the only means through which Baldwin can access and articulate the universal - white experience – is through the experience of being black. According to Allen, Baldwin succeeds in doing so through the shared language of the Bible. And for Lashley, it is the common struggle for self that make the message of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* stand outside the scope of the African-American experience. Both Allen and Lashley's attempts at making *Go Tell It on the Mountain* more than just a "Negro novel" assume the existence of a universal experience that stands beyond categories like race, gender, sexuality and class. If read differently, one can see the novel assumes no such thing. Nor, however, does it offer a unique "black experience" as profoundly distinct from the experience of being an American.

Placing a critical stopping point on Baldwin's fiction at *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as Lashley and others have, reveals the very literary dilemma Baldwin

struggled over in his own life. For the question of whether or not Baldwin succeeded in a literary sense with the novels that followed is undeniably tied to assumptions about what is expected of a black writer. In fact, the praise and canonizing of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* for depicting "universal" experiences where his other novels cannot, actually masks the complexities of experience and representation with which *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is concerned. Among other things, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is seen as Baldwin's "safe" novel, the one he needed to write in order to be welcomed into the mainstream (both black and white) literary community. Yet, the ease with which literary critics have read *Go Tell It on the Mountain* does not erase the authorial risks that exist within it. And when read closely, the novel soon becomes a springboard for the controversy that would surround his future fiction.

Universalizing the flesh and personalizing the spirit

Adding to the entanglement of black and white identity construction and representation, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* carries within it the historical weight of a religion that has, at times, served to enhance the spirit, and at others, only stifle it. Coming from the evangelical Christianity portrayed in the novel himself, James Baldwin understood the central place the spiritual has in American life.

The insertion and adoption of Christianity into early slave societies gave birth to a Christianity influenced by both The Great Awakening as well as various African spirit traditions. This melding yielded a paradoxical history. Christianity within the black community has served as a source of comfort and liberation as well as a prison of unattainable orthodoxies that can never fit the lived experience and complex identities of individuals. Wrapped intimately in the relationship and history between

blacks and Christianity are the complexities found in the relationship between black and white identity. The prose itself reflects the intricacies of this relationship by "bringing together a stunning grasp of English prose with the language, rhythms and cadences of the black church."[24]

With the moral tone of a sermon, Baldwin weaves biblical parallels and references throughout the narrative yet brilliantly avoids easy one-on-one correlations. This is consistent with Baldwin's refusal to align any identity portrayed in the novel with one of the many ruthless binaries from which an orthodox ideology of Christianity and white racist thought exert their power.

Commenting on the history of whiteness as an ideology, Valerie Babb writes, "The ideology of whiteness wove together arbitrary traits of hair color, eye color, skin color, religious belief, language, morality, and class into a network of standards against which those it defined as different could be measured."[25] It is the arbitrariness of these standards that makes them particularly damaging to the self-image of those whom they define. The "weaving together" of these traits has taken place over time and continues to evolve, creating the sense of aimlessness and lack of foundation among Americans. Baldwin illustrates this process and its damaging effects in the second section of the novel, "Prayers of the Saints." Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth's pasts reveal how the unforgiving effects of whiteness on black identity interact with the choices and spirit of an individual to shape who she becomes.

The novel begins on the day of John Grimes' fourteenth birthday. He is beginning to feel the weight of expectations placed upon him by the religious

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[24] Lashley, "Book Review: James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain," vol.
[25] Valerie Babb, Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 169.

community of his father as well as the seductive temptations of a secular world. John has been raised to understand that the paths of the righteous and the damned between which he finds himself struggling are divided along racial, sexual, and intellectual lines. These are the same lines along which John is seeking after his identity, lines that are, in fact, not so rigidly drawn.

An immediate illustration of the blurred line separating sanctity from sinfulness takes place when the Grimes family walks down the street to the Temple of the Fire Baptized. With Paul's portrait of Rome resounding in the background of John's account[26] we learn that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and no one is exempt from the temptations of the flesh, even his pious parents:[27]

> Sinners along the avenue watched them – men still wearing their Saturday night clothes, wrinkled and dusty now, muddy-eyed and muddy-faced; and women with harsh voices and tight, bright dresses, cigarettes between their fingers or held tightly in the corners of their mouths. They talked, and laughed, and fought together, and the women fought like the men….They had gone from cursing to laughter, to anger, to lust. Once he and Roy had watched a man and a woman in the basement of a condemned house. They did it standing up…And his mother and father, they did it too, and sometimes John heard them in the bedroom behind him, over the sound of rats' feet, and rats' screams, and the music and cursing from the harlot's house downstairs.[28]

As the chronicling of John's daily life continues, we see that the devil's work is present in more places than just street corners and harlot houses. The congregation of the Temple of the Fire Baptized is engaged in an unending battle to ward off the sins among the righteous. John recalls when Father James uncovered the sin that

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[26] Romans 1:24-26, "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another…Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones…" (NIV).
[27] Romans 3:23 (NIV).
[28] James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York: Random House (Modern Library Edition), 1952) 4-5.

lurked dormant within the relationship between two congregants, Elisha and Ella Mae. If they continued in their "walking out alone together, their secrets and laughter, and touching of hands, they would surely sin a sin beyond all forgiveness."[29] Even though sin was not on their minds, sin was in the flesh and it was the duty of the pastor to publicly reveal and remove such a sin from the lives of his sheep.

In John's mind however, Father James' efforts to shift the focus from the flesh onto the spirit have the opposite effect. Uncovering Elisha's and Ella Mae's potential sin fills John's mind with nothing but the flesh of their bodies from which the sin is extricated. John's thoughts burn with the sinful passion of a crime not yet committed. Ella Mae's "white robes now seemed the merest, thinnest covering for the nakedness of breasts and insistent thighs."[30] The same fever to which they have been accused of succumbing begins to rage in John so that he can think of nothing else.

The church scene with Elisha and Ella Mae can be seen as representative of the ideology of disembodiment that is central to Christianity and has taken on a more complex role within black Christianity. In denying the body its desires, it is believed that one becomes closer to the perfect image of God in Christ Jesus.[31] The goal, then, of Christian salvation is a disembodied spiritual self that can find pleasure only in the mind and the spirit. As Elisha tells John, "When the Lord saves you He burns out that old Adam, He gives you a new mind and a new heart, and then you don't find no

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[29] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 12.
[30] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 12.
[31] The night Jesus is betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, he asks the disciples to stay awake and keep watch while he goes to pray. Three times he came back to find them sleeping. After the first time he says to them, "Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Mark 14:37-38). This is an oft quoted verse for the defense of denying bodily desires to bolster the power of the spirit.

pleasure in the world. You get all your joy in walking and talking with Jesus every day."[32]

This particular tenet of Christianity has been used complexly by both white and black Christians. For one of the many binaries upon which racist thought relies is the notion that white skin signifies the ability to think and reason; it represents the cerebral high-mindedness necessary to resist bodily desires. What gives legitimacy to this invention is the mapping out of its opposite onto the black body, imagined to be irrational, primitive and a slave to carnal instincts. Illicit sex, gluttony and violence become conflated with black skin to make the doctrine of Christian purity easily associated with a white soul *and* body.

For black Christians, one can also see the possibilities found in Christianity for a radically egalitarian reading of the same promise. The idea of salvation enabling one to "escape" a flesh that relegates her to the sinful side of a series of racist binaries has at the same time offered tools for combating the effects of such banishment. For, if, as the Bible says, through Christ there is only one spiritual self then categories such as race and gender are rendered meaningless.[33]

Yet, as we see in the lives of John Grimes and the Saints, regardless of how much meaning can be reclaimed through appropriating the Christian doctrine, simply replacing one worldview made up of dichotomies for another fails to disrupt the complexity of black and white identity construction. For, as Baldwin warns, relying on easily accessible categories to engage in such a process can only destroy meaning, not provide it:

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[32] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 63.
[33] Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV).

> Our passion for categorization, life neatly fit into pegs, has led to an unforeseen paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions.[34]

Consequently, any effort to disrupt the singular identities meant to pigeonhole the lives of those who stand outside the white, male, heterosexual norm must recognize the role Christianity plays in securing "life neatly into pegs". Its language is central to the American experiment that has made the dark, evil and light, good. As a result, dark and light skinned peoples in America have been forever locked, whether they call themselves Christians or not, in a battle over definitions. It is a history and an ideology that must be reckoned with on John's, and every American's, quest for self.

On the morning of John's birthday, he wakes to remember that he also has committed a sin that is beyond forgiveness.

> He had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak.[35]

John's same sex desire remains a subtle subtext throughout the rest of the novel – one of many early readers failed to grasp. Reasons for this have to do with the effort on the part of the black literary community to adopt the novel as what some would term, a *positive* representation of black life. As something from which the black community has sought to distance itself, homosexuality could not be read as a theme in one of its canonized novels.

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[34] James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) 19.
[35] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 14.

On the other hand, reckoning with John's same sex desire would also give pause to critics like Shirley Allen, who wish to claim that his struggles are the same struggles that every youth, regardless of color, experiences as he transitions to adulthood. Making no mention of the homoeroticism evident in John's relationship with Elisha or the sexually charged nature of his conversion experience, Allen (nonetheless tellingly) reads John's conversion as an "initiation into manhood."[36] Addressing homosexuality – a decidedly non-universal problem – would undoubtedly messy Allen's (and many others before and after her) otherwise tidy analysis. Baldwin, aware of the danger in including homosexuality as a (albeit attenuated) theme in his first novel, took the risk in order to expose the kind of silencing that takes place when identity is color-coded in this way.

When recognized, we can see that John's sexual desire is a disruption in the binaries between which he feels pulled: salvation and perdition, the white world and the black world. His deviant sexuality gives him a body in a community that denies the body its desires. Beyond that community lies a world that defiles his body because of its blackness. Therefore the presence of John's body in either space creates a fissure in the destructive system of duality to which he is subjected.

The first mention of John's encounter with and feelings towards white people is a memory of the day he claims to have "perceived…his individual existence."[37] John was in the first grade and the white principal of his school complemented him on his great work in writing the alphabet. Because they were uttered by a voice outside of his reality, these few words gave John a foundation for his identity. The

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[36] Allen, "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," 173.
[37] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 16.

significance of the principal's race lies in the fact that her whiteness assures John of her objectivity. In John's life, the praise he is usually offered is in relation to what he will do for "his people," yet John is "not much interested in his people and still less in leading them anywhere."[38] He instead dreams of a life outside the walls of the tabernacle and the streets of Harlem. Therefore, having his intelligence praised by someone who has access to that world secures in him an identity he can embrace and evaluate with a set of standards different than that of his father and his father's church.

Yet, this symbolic rejection of the expectations of the black community in which he was raised does by no means secure a place for John outside of it. In John's visit to Manhattan we see that he holds no grandiose notions that the world of his principal will fling its doors wide to receive him. "This world was not for him. If he refused to believe and wanted to break his neck trying, then he could try until the sun refused to shine; they would never let him enter."[39]

What the memory of John's principal does reveal however, is that occupying the position of outside observer looking in can often give clarity to an otherwise shapeless identity. From that moment on, John begins to see himself as set apart, as an individual. Acting as a shield against all forces that would essentialize or choose for him, his new identity also gives him the ability to see and name these forces for what they are even as he cannot escape them. He indicts his father and the God of his father for the cruel way in which each rules over his house.[40] And as he walks

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[38] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 15.
[39] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 39.
[40] The verse of II Kings 20:1, "This is what the Lord says, 'Put your house in order…'" (NIV) is referred to as Gabriel's text.

through the city he witnesses the impossible situation in which white racism has placed him. If he chases after the approval of the white and sinful world, all that awaits him is rejection, disappointment and eternal damnation. And if he follows the way of the cross, all he is promised is a life exactly like his father's.

The weight of history bears down on John as he stands at this precipice. He has inherited Christianity as he has inherited his blackness; both were truths passed down by those who came before him. Rejection would mean rejection of the very foundations of his identity. "He could not claim, as African savages might be able to claim, that no one had brought him the gospel. His father and mother and all the saints had taught him from his earliest childhood what was the will of God."[41] With more than a hint of irony, John understands that the same faith promising salvation for him and his people is the same faith that helped to bring about their earthly suffering. We see then, that John's struggle to find a way to "kneel before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father"[42] is reflexive of the same struggle the Saints and many blacks before them undertook to worship the God of deliverance without first worshipping the white God of their oppressors.

Writing Women

The depth with which Baldwin writes Florence and Elizabeth, the two main female characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is often glossed over in criticism in favor of focusing on John and Gabriel. One work that seeks to bring the women in the novel to the surface is Trudier Harris' *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin.* In it, she argues that the female characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, largely due

[41] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 44.
[42] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 17.

to the guilty power the church holds over them, serve as willing scapegoats for the male egos in the novel. While Harris concedes that Florence and Elizabeth are "strong female characters" she claims that Baldwin only writes them in relation to the men of the novel. Florence serves as Gabriel's personal Jeremiah[43] – reminding him of his own bloodguilt when he attempts to condemn others – yet she continues to judge herself with the values he espouses. And Elizabeth, in spite of expressing slightly more independence from the church than Florence, she centers her life solely upon men.[44] According to Harris, the one redeeming factor that comes from this identification (though she does not expound on why this might be) is that "the women are equally if not more memorable than the male characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*" For this, she forgives Baldwin his "shortcomings in presenting black female characters."[45]

The importance of the church in the lives of these women, Harris argues, is the primary limitation Baldwin places on them. She claims that in not portraying any females who possess possibilities outside their roles as churchwomen and in turn, wives and mothers, Baldwin reveals his inability to imagine women beyond their relation to men. What Harris misses in this charge is that there is not any character in the novel that Baldwin portrays as having possibilities beyond the tabernacle walls. There are a series of "prisons" (for which the church oftentimes serves as a metaphor) that run throughout the novel, restricting each character's ability to forge a positive

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[43] According to tradition, the prophet Jeremiah's writings are collected in the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentation in the Old Testament. He is described by rabbinic scholars as the "broken-hearted prophet" whom God called to warn the people of Judah of their ruin, yet whose true prophecies went unheeded.
[44] Trudier Harris, Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985).
[45] Harris, Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin 59.

self-identity. One such prison is the prison of racialized masculinity practiced by Gabriel and upheld by the church. As Harris points out, Florence, Elizabeth and John are linked in their shared victimization at the hands of Gabriel. However, Harris comes up short in her identification analysis when she implies that this relation effaces or limits the feminine influence in the novel. On the contrary, a more fluid conception of gender and its role allocation runs throughout the novel to highlight the destructive effects of an unattainable ideal of masculinity and femininity on black men and women.

It is true that the presence of a collective female consciousness is rare in the narratives of both Florence and Elizabeth. Both have troubled relationships with the mother figures in their lives; relationships that continue to haunt them even after the older women are physically absent. The moments of cooperation and support between women that do appear come largely in response to a shared oppression. Harris argues this suggests that "how they view their lives, even when not in the presence of men, is still informed by male-centered directives that they seem unable to escape."[46]

However, the moments of collective consciousness among women are consistent with how often Baldwin portrays race consciousness. In fact, one could argue that Florence and Gabriel represent the extremes of this awareness in their hatred of men and white people respectively. For one of the reasons why *Go Tell It on the Mountain* has been read as an apolitical novel is because Gabriel's hatred of white people is portrayed as a negative aspect of his character. Yet, this fact should not give license to disregard the significance of moments when a shared oppression is recognized.

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[46] Harris, Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin 13.

One such example is the bond between Deborah and Florence that is borne out of Deborah's rape. After Deborah's "accident," her sexually violated body became a "living reproach, to herself and to all black women and to all black men."[47] Having the identity of "woman" forever closed off to her, Deborah is lusted after like a harlot convincing both she and Florence "that all men were like this, their thoughts rose no higher, and they lived only to gratify on the bodies of women their brutal and humiliating needs"[48]

In Deborah's rape, we can see the double-oppression suffered by black women as receptacles of both white and black male needs and desires. Their position as women makes their bodies a site for the mapping out of male identity. This is then compounded with white identity's need for a black body upon which to project its own needs and desires. Like John's body secretly desiring other men, Deborah's defiled body represents a disruption and perversion of the "correct" ordering of desire mandated by a (hetero)sexist and racist paradigm. Misplaced white desire has contaminated her black body and accordingly, Deborah (not the men who rape her) becomes the sexual perversion. Thus, making her – like all sexual perversions – at once a public dishonor and a secret object of lust.

Having already witnessed the nuanced way in which Baldwin deals with sexuality and race in the novel, one should keep that in mind when offering the sort of survey analysis of gender that Harris does. For while the parallel above can be said to maintain Harris' "male-centered directive," it could also be seen as a subtle means through which Baldwin illustrates the interconnectedness of various oppressions in

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[47] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 86.
[48] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 87.

the lives of individuals. For John too, suffers under this male-centered order that dictates the appropriate desires and interests of both men and women.

Early in the novel we learn that "John excelled in school, though not, like Elisha, in mathematics or basketball." He instead dreams of being a "poet or a movie star [and drinking] expensive whiskey, and [smoking] Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green package."[49] Mathematics and basketball, in their typical gendering are thought to be male-dominated activities. John has no interest or talent in these areas. In this way, it is not just Florence and Elizabeth who suffer because of their relation to men. John expressing "feminine traits" and failing to fit into the violent and selfish masculinity embodied in Gabriel presents a challenge to the rigid gender binary upon which Harris believes Baldwin depends.

Examples of "gender-bending" and its relationship to racial identity construction can be found in the female characters as well. In her relationship with Frank, Florence tries to control and imagine him in the way that men control and imagine women. She makes him shave his mustache, brings him to uplift meetings and "subdued church services," in an attempt to make him into the kind of husband who would reflect respectability back onto her.

In one of Baldwin's later novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, through the first person narrative of Tish, we can get a sense of the dilemma in which Florence finds herself:

> I suppose that the root of the resentment – a resentment which hides a bottomless terror – has to do with the fact that a woman is tremendously controlled by what the man's imagination makes of her – literally, hour by hour, day by day; so she becomes a woman. But a

[49] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 15.

> man exists in his own imagination and can never be at the mercy of a woman's.[50]

Frank passively allows Florence to control him, yet Florence discovers that no matter how much she takes on the "male role" the forces that keep Frank a "common nigger" are beyond her control. They are determined largely by the standards set by a racist and sexist world and no amount of assertion or conformity will alter its reality. Her imaginings of Frank will not raise him to the standard of manhood upheld by the world Florence hopes to enter any more than the bleaching cream she uses will make her closer to its standard of womanhood. Hence, after ten years of battling between a deep, yet reluctant love for Frank and a bitter drive to escape the markers of her identity that would render her common, Florence drives Frank away.

Elizabeth, in her relationship with Richard is at once cast as selfless helpmate and strong protector: "She thought of herself as his strength; in a world of shadows, the indisputable reality to which he could always repair."[51] However, the sexist order does not allow for Elizabeth to express this strength. And in turn, it disallows Richard's ability to be weak and vulnerable. These restrictions strip Elizabeth and Richard of any shields they may have had to withstand the blows of a racist world.

When Richard is "mistakenly" arrested for robbing a store, Elizabeth, in an effort to find him, find the two white policemen responsible for his arrest instead. They inform her of his crime and, to Elizabeth's great relief "a cold, stony rage" enters her. We then witness in Elizabeth the same violent rage that Gabriel has the night he encounters white men.

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[50] Baldwin, James. If Beale Street Could Talk. Laurel. New York Dell Publishing, 1974. 64.
[51] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 211.

> She wanted to take that pistol and empty it into his round, red face; to take that club and strike with all her strength against the base of his skull where his cap ended, until the ugly, silky, white man's hair was matted with blood and brains.[52]

The night we witness this reaction from Gabriel is the night that he comes face to face with an adult Royal, his son from his affair with Esther, the breathing example of his sin. Gabriel is walking to the store to retrieve medicine for Deborah and passes a group of white men whom he recognizes as part of a lynching mob that had mutilated the body of a black man just that morning. Keeping his head low as he walks past them, one spits at his feet. Gabriel avoids any reaction and hears them whisper behind him that "he was a good nigger, surely up to no trouble." He walks on and though he asks God for loving-kindness, he cannot help but imagine beating a white man "again and again, until the head wobbled on the broken neck and his foot encountered nothing but the rushing blood."[53] Echoing Gabriel's rage within the mind of Elizabeth prevents any easy correlation between her sex and her thoughts and actions, thereby serving as an example of how Elizabeth's character may not be as bounded by her gender as it seems.

Without enough evidence to convict him, Richard is eventually released. By this time, Elizabeth knows of her pregnancy, but does not tell him. On the night of his homecoming, unable to overcome the damage done to him in jail, Richard ends his life.

Choosing to end Richard's life via suicide is another risk Baldwin takes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and lays the groundwork for his much more controversial novel, *Another Country* in which the main character, Rufus, takes his own life.

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[52] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 220.
[53] Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son 182.

Moreover, Richard's suicide can be seen as running counter to Harris' accusation (as well as accusations we will encounter in the future) that Baldwin negates the feminine. If, as Elisabeth Bronfen has argued, femininity and suicide have been similarly socially constructed – as the Other, the uncanny, the scandalous, the unrepresentable,[54] then Richard's suicide can be read as an adoption of the feminine rather than a negation. In committing such an act and leaving Elizabeth behind in the world, he has rendered both their gendered identities unstable.

Clearly aware of the traps, Baldwin made what Harris might consider conservative choices surrounding gender in *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* However, as I have attempted to show, just as the nearly undetectable theme of homosexuality runs under the surface of the novel, so too do possibilities for a more "dangerous" reading of gender.

Bigger's Son

Unlike John, who wants power with which "to win that love which he so longed for,"[55] Gabriel, from his very beginnings, thirsted after a different kind of power. Ironically, in the end, conversion to Christianity gave them both the language and authority to express that power. John discovers it on the threshing floor through his friendship and love for Elisha. Gabriel finds that his conversion and subsequent claim to be God's anointed gives him a space to exercise the power and masculinity not afforded him by the rest of the world:

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[54] Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
[55] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 16.

> Yes, he wanted power – he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed…He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God.[56]

Also paralleling John's conversion, Gabriel is awakened with sexual desire prior to his encounter with God. However, the differences are clear. Where John is filled with "a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha"[57] Gabriel is filled with the fresh memory of his "bed of sin" and still smelling of sweat and fluids when he is struck dumb by the power of the Lord:

> And, thinking of this, his body freezing with his sweat, and yet altogether violent with the memory of lust, he came to a tree on a gentle rise, beyond which, and out of sight, lay home, where his mother lay.[58]

Thinking of his mother and the feel of a stranger's shivering body fresh on his skin, Gabriel is struck by God's judgment and he weeps "like a little child."[59] The transcendent nature of Gabriel's conversion experience echoes the "otherworldly" language just employed to describe his lusty deed. Moreover, conflating and confusing sexual pleasure, violence and religious ecstasy foreshadows Gabriel's fate and the fates of those who will suffer from his sins.

In keeping with the fusion of religion and sex in the body of Gabriel, his affair with Esther is riddled with the religious language of the Fall. He, innocent Adam is unwittingly brought down by the conniving Eve. It was Esther and the child conceived in her body that stood in the way of Gabriel fulfilling God's divine plan, therefore their sacrifice was one of necessity, not malice. God had allowed Gabriel to fall so low so as to raise him up even higher in glory. Hence, the violence inflicted

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[56] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 113.
[57] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 253.
[58] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 117.
[59] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 118.

upon Esther and Royal because of Gabriel's actions is redeemed through Gabriel's powerlessness in the face of forces beyond his control.

In this way, though he does not murder with his own hands, Gabriel's crimes rival, yet do not conflate with those of Bigger Thomas, Richard Wright's famous killer as victim in *Native Son.* Baldwin criticizes Wright for his construction of Bigger explicitly in his essays, yet as we shall see in many ways, Gabriel serves as a more effective, yet far riskier retort.

The risk lies in the fact that Bigger's identity cannot be actively created for it is made of a myth already written. On the other hand, Gabriel's identity is forged through the choices he makes and the circumstances he encounters. Writing him this way leaves Baldwin vulnerable to the sort of presumptions articulated by those like Prescott who deny any presence of social critique within the character of Gabriel. Nevertheless, Baldwin makes it clear that Bigger Thomas and the societal indictment he embodies resides within Gabriel Grimes, just as the image of America's dark other, whether recognized as such or not, is present in both the white and black mind. Offering a reproduction of that image on paper as Bigger does only reflects the myth, not the complex relationship and society that fashioned it.

Wright may have succeeded in showing white America its responsibility for Bigger and his crimes, yet that does nothing to exorcise Bigger from its imagination. Bigger's bitter hatred at once justifies his crimes as well as absolves him of responsibility for them, thus making his punishment in no way redeeming as we are entreated to believe. With Gabriel as contrast, we can only read the construction of Bigger as either a product of holistic victimization or as conclusive proof of black

pathology. Neither reading, however, does much to disrupt the effects of racism and white identity construction with which Baldwin was concerned. For the former satisfies the white liberals in their perceived ability to "accept their racist past" from which Bigger is an artifact. Of course then, his perishing holds no redemption in their eyes, merely a necessary and inevitable death in the path of progress. The latter reading then takes care of the rest of white America: those who believed all along that their "B[n]igger fantasy" was true.

"Walking through the stereotype," so to speak, as Wright does with Bigger provides a sensational indictment and warning, yet it is an unrealistic one. Bigger uses the centuries old Jeffersonian fear that if those who rule are not careful, one day soon the tables may turn and the oppressed will rise to enact their revenge upon the powerful.[60] However, as Baldwin recognizes, this only serves to reinstate the binary of oppressor to oppressed, when in fact their kinship is much more complicated. Conversely, Gabriel's character attempts to embody the convoluted relationship between blacks and themselves while also exemplifying certain tropes of American identity that whites and blacks share.

For instance, as white liberals give shape to their identity in loving to hate their racist past through negating its significance on the present, so too does Gabriel glean his identity through loving to hate his sins and reminding others of theirs. Both do so in order to hide the fear that perhaps certain progress has indeed not been made.

> It was later to become his proud testimony that he hated his sins – even as he ran towards sin, even as he sinned. He hated the evil that lived in his body, and he feared it, as he feared and hated the lions of lust and longing that prowled the defenseless city of his mind.[61]

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[60] From *Notes on the State of Virginia.*
[61] Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain 114.

In this way, Baldwin subtly weaves Gabriel's life and experiences into the fabric of the larger society inherently implicated it in his crimes. Additionally, the narratives told from the perspective of those who suffer from Gabriel's sins offer relational access points – markedly absent in *Native Son* – providing the reader with the "revelatory apprehension" of Gabriel as one of the "Negro's realities…conveying a sense of Negro life as a continuing and complex group reality."[62] Therefore, one cannot assume, as with Bigger, that generations of oppression is what has made Gabriel unable to love and ultimately rendered him subhuman. Gabriel's destruction stems not from his inability to love, but from loving only himself and failing to reckon with the Bigger Thomas in his skull.

"Can't say I didn't warn you"

The subtle themes and possibilities of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* outlined thus far come to an ambiguous culmination with the conversion of John at the end of the novel. This somewhat disturbing event has been interpreted in a myriad of ways by critics since the novel's publication. Many, like Shirley Allen mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, have seen it as a universal rite of passage in which John puts on "the cloak of manhood" and comes to terms with his past and the pasts of his ancestors.[63] Others, such as Fred L. Standley, have read it as an ironic "indicting of both blacks and whites for the nature of their society and their ways of dealing with it."[64]

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[62] Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son 39.
[63] Allen, "Religious Symbolism and Psychic Reality in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*," 199.
[64] Fred L. Standley, "*Go Tell It on the Mountain*: Religion as the Indirect Method of Indictment," Critical Essays on James Baldwin, ed. Nancy V. Burt Fred L. Standley (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co. , 1988) 193.

Exhaustive Biblical symbolism and imagery combine with convincing physicality to stand in opposition to John's tenuous relationship with Christianity previously outlined, thus making the "Threshing Floor" nearly unreadable. At the moment when John "lay astonished beneath the power of the Lord" neither redemption nor salvation has descended upon any of the characters who stand in search of it. After chronicling lives filled with bitterness, tragedy, disappointment and self-hatred in the face of "salvation," it seems a difficult move to presume that John's salvation will yield different results.

The underlying themes of the novel serve to springboard Baldwin into his next two novels. With understatement, irony and powerful visuals Baldwin explores the limits of both literary form and social content. In this case, religion is the vehicle through which *Go Tell It on the Mountain* moves. Yet, in the fiction that follows, Baldwin may exchange cars but not concerns. As John's final words of the novel: "I'm coming. I'm on my way." indicate that his journey has just begun so too do they signal a warning to critics who would see in this first work the culmination of a novelist who has only just embarked.

A Book in Drag:
Gender Performance and *Giovanni's Room*

The scholarship on *Giovanni's Room* is sparse. Most critics consider its portrayal of all white characters and homosexuality to be a tragic detour in James Baldwin's true calling as an African American writer. Others have made equally problematic claims that it stands as the "best American novel on homosexuality."[65]

At the time of its release in 1956, Baldwin knew *Giovanni's Room* would be a much more daring novel than *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* yet he had not anticipated the rejection it would receive from publishers. According to W.J. Weatherby, Baldwin was told that it "would ruin his reputation as a leading young black writer."[66] He finally managed to publish it in England, after which it was taken up by American publishers.

It was not until the rise of black and gay and lesbian studies in the 1960s that *Giovanni's Room* found its way into the enigmatic and contested place it remains in today. As an extension of the tendency for most literary scholars to pay closer attention to Baldwin's essays than his fiction, they are also content to dismiss

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[65] William Esty, "The Cities of the Plain," New Republic 135 (1956): 26.
[66] W. J. Weatherby, James Baldwin: Artist on Fire (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1989) 119.

Giovanni's Room in the same way Weatherby tells us Baldwin's old classmate, Sol Stein did when he recalls,

> Jimmy wanted to be a novelist more than anything else and I pressed him to be as true as he could be. He was a very great essayist, not a great novelist, certainly not in the same class. When we talked about *Giovanni's Room* I quickly saw that this was not a talkable subject. To me, it was a book in drag as it were, much less good than *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.[67]

As made evident in the first chapter, Sol Stein's hailing of Baldwin's first novel as his peak of fictive performance is typical. For those looking to Baldwin for the up and coming voice of black people, straying from "traditional" black themes (homosexuality, for instance, would not have been considered on the list) would place this position in jeopardy. And Baldwin's white audience would have had an uneasy reception of both the homosexuality as well as an all-white novel written by a black man. As a result of this fear, *Giovanni's Room* was relegated to a strictly homosexual novel and taken up by the gay and lesbian literary canon and the expense of its racial implications.

Yet, Sol Stein's words may expose more than he intended. Referring to the novel as a "book in drag" reveals the white-heterosexual panic it incited at the time. Unlike *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* it is far more difficult to read *Giovanni's Room* with the same timidity. Perhaps for this reason an editor at Knopf in 1956 claimed that *Giovanni's Room* was "way ahead of its time,"[68] thus foreshadowing the far reaching potential contained within this sorely misunderstood novel.

Two of the most recent critical essays to explore *Giovanni's Room* with any significant intellectual depth – and that, in turn will be useful for our purposes – are

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Weatherby, James Baldwin: Artist on Fire 119.

Marlon Ross' "White Fantasies of Desire" and Cora Kaplan's "A Cavern Opened in My Mind: The Poetics of Homosexuality and the Politics of Masculinity in James Baldwin."

Ross provides a useful analysis of the way in which Baldwin uses an ostensibly raceless novel to bring to light the "strange problem of being white." In recognizing that from "its publication to the present, *Giovanni's Room* has been read as a homosexual novel"[69] Ross seeks to bring to light the racial implications of desire that are present in the novel. In comparing the works of James Baldwin and Chester Himes, Ross points out that in both authors' fiction that deals with same-sex desire they "omit" black characters. Rather than this serving to "de-race" the novel, Ross argues it is instead an effort to "emplot [sic] both the issue of color and the question of same-sex desire as notions isolated in discourse but not in experience."[70]

The first half of Ross' piece will provide a starting point upon which we can build a discussion of how identity and desire are expressed in *Giovanni's Room.* After which, Ross falls prey to what we see in most Baldwin scholarship when his interests turn from Baldwin's writing to his political life and his relationships with other black male writers and the black community in general. It is then that his piece begins to lose momentum. For Ross concludes what had begun as an extremely nuanced effort to expose the intricacies of white identity construction as it is articulated through desires and denials with this somewhat simplistic recommendation to the black community:

> If we search our own communities, articulate our desires, so that we have nothing to hide and nothing to purge, we shall be better able to

[69] Marlon Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," James Baldwin Now, ed. Dwiight McBride (1999) 15.
[70] Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," 23.

> dismiss and disregard the white obsession with policing our sexualities – a policing that we ourselves have unfortunately, on occasion, internalized as a self-project, in effect attempting to do their dirty work for them.[71]

Ross seems to be recommending that the black community "come out of the closet" in order to be able to "dismiss and disregard" the policing of their identity by the white community. This advice seems to fail on several points. Eve Sedgwick in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* discusses the act of coming out of the closet as a perpetual action and one that does not have the liberating effects one might imagine. In claiming that the black community is "hiding something" Ross is making liberal use of the rhetoric of secrecy that, in quoting D.A. Miller, Sedgwick claims

> can function as the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established, and the sanctity of the first term kept inviolate. And the phenomenon of the "open secret" does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of those binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery.[72]

Suggesting that black homosexuality become an "open secret" among the black community as Ross does will not disturb the "binarisms" that he must keep intact in order to do so. That is, he is "recovering" the notion of a distinctly separate (and monolithic) black community in order to suggest a dismissal of the (now exposed) enemy, white policing of desire. More problematical, Ross is linking this recommendation to the work that Baldwin was involved in. However, as we shall see, it is in fact, the opposite that Baldwin is attempting.

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[71] Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," 45.
[72] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. The Epistemology of the Closet. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990 67.

"A Cavern Opened in My Mind" begins with one of Baldwin's famous quotes he wrote in his 1960 essay, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown": "Negroes want to be treated like men." This assertion frames the rest of Cora Kaplan's essay in which she explores "both the dynamism and the limits of Baldwin's complex negotiation of masculinity in the fifties and early sixties."[73]

Though she claims to be focusing on his early work, the bulk of Kaplan's critique circulates around *Another Country* and *Giovanni's Room.*[74] With particular attention paid to *Giovanni's Room,* Kaplan attempts to "explore the playing out of tensions around race, masculinity, homosexuality and culture in the novel."[75] As her foundation, Kaplan argues that the binary of sexual difference plays a central role in the novels in question. According to Kaplan, Baldwin makes it clear (through a quote taken from a 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein) that while "men sleeping with men must be part of a revised masculinity, 'a man is a man, a woman is a woman…'(183)" and that "this binary has a defining priority in Baldwin's work."[76] It is his inability to trouble this particular dichotomy that taints Baldwin's otherwise groundbreaking insights into the construction of marginal identities. As she writes:

> But while he eloquently details the modes through which dominant American male culture exploits women by inventing for itself a crude hypermasculinity, and accepts with sorrow that black men are rarely

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[73] Carol Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," Representing Black Men, ed. Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham (New York: Routledge, 1996) 28.

[74] Her only mention of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* at all is her claim that in it (along with in *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country)* Baldwin offers a "critique and revision of black and white masculinities" (31). Whether or not this omission is telling is up for debate, however the failure to mention Baldwin's first novel seems to privilege the assumption that sexuality and sexual desire was not a consideration in his portrayal of "African American life," but only became one when Baldwin began to write white characters. Yet, John Grimes' same-sex desire in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* while not explicit is a present and important underlying theme.

[75] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 29.

[76] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 38.

> all they could be to their women, Baldwin never argues that a projective paranoia quite leads men to invent women.[77]

For this reason, *Giovanni's Room,* as Baldwin's most powerful fictional indictment of this kind of 'crude masculinity,' requires a repudiation of the feminine in order to create the "homoerotic masculinity" which Baldwin presumably idealizes.[78] The "feminine" in Kaplan's conceptualization is enacted throughout *Giovanni's Room* by the female sexed characters, Ellen and Hella as well as the "grotesque figurations" of the drag queens and feminized homosexuals. She outlines how each are either discursively or literally eradicated throughout the novel in order to realize the new vision of masculinity through the relationships between men. Thus proving, in Kaplan's understanding, that for Baldwin, it is the "fact of the two sexes, not the primacy of their [hetero]sexual relation that needs to be secured."[79]

Cora Kaplan ends her essay as she began it with Baldwin's words. In an effort, it seems, to redeem him from the "anti-feminine" and "anti-freak" position found in his early writing, Kaplan juxtaposes the opening passage with a passage Baldwin wrote twenty years later in his 1984 essay, "Freaks and the Ideal of American manhood." In it, she claims he "makes a definitive turn towards a new paradigm" through his "decisive inclusion of the grotesque."[80] Kaplan's essay hinges on the suggestion that Baldwin fails to explode the binary of sexual difference in his early works making his "inclusion of the grotesque" in an essay written for *Playboy* three years prior to his death, a new and sudden development in his consciousness.

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[77] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 38.
[78] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 39.
[79] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 38.
[80] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 48. Baldwin's quote in question is as follows: "Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated – in the main, abominably – because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires…"

However, the interview upon which Kaplan bases Baldwin's dualistic attachment, that is, the Goldstein interview, takes place the same year – 1984 – that Baldwin writes the "Freaks" essay in which, according to Kaplan, he "moves beyond the unresolved questions adumbrated in his earlier writing on manhood and race, manhood and homosexuality."[81]

How then are we to accept Kaplan's argument that Baldwin's early writings reject the feminine and the freak while the ambiguity of Baldwin's own words renders her claims suspect? Specifically, Kaplan's reading of *Giovanni's Room* is predicated on her causal connection between the binary of sexual difference that leads to Baldwin's repulsion and rejection of freaks and the feminine. More problematically, to support this claim Kaplan relies on conflating Baldwin's lived reality with the imagined one of *Giovanni's Room*. Speaking of a text taken from Baldwin's "Male Prison," Kaplan asserts

> This bleak passage spells out some of the "terror" of his [Baldwin's] early life in the Village, adumbrating the elaboration of the homosexual "underworld" in *Giovanni's Room,* the novel whose textualization of so many of the key terms I have been exploring helps to unlock the antitheses and contradictions in Baldwin's revision of what he somewhere calls that "kaleidoscopic word, men."[82]

Could Kaplan's charge that Baldwin "takes for granted the normative categories of gender, race and culture" that she chalks up to his historical circumstances be selling Baldwin too short? Is it possible her assertion that Baldwin harbors a fear of the grotesque as it is expressed through the performance of drag and exaggerated femininity is a reflection of Kaplan's own desire to rescue an essential femininity from the more fluid conception of gender that exists in Baldwin's work?

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[81] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 48.
[82] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 39.

Moreover, regardless of Baldwin's own words regarding the "fact of the two sexes" do there perhaps exists more productive possibilities for breaking down that binary in an alternative reading of *Giovanni's Room*? Could it be that the book itself performs a sort of drag within Baldwin's literary canon that evokes for critics like Kaplan the same kind of attraction and repulsion of the grotesque?

What is useful in Kaplan's analysis is her interest in the presence of the grotesque in *Giovanni's Room* and what it means for the construction and performance of sexual and racial identity. There are too, troubling aspects of her discussion stemming largely from her inability to separate Baldwin's personal and political life (a tendency Marlon Ross is guilty of as well, yet less unsettlingly) in order to support her readings of his fiction. In doing so, Kaplan necessarily limits the possibilities that lie therein. Oftentimes, by their very nature, novels grow legs their authors rarely envision. Because of Baldwin's "sexy" personal life as writer on the margins, it is easy and tempting for critics and scholars to read much of his fiction as autobiographical. *Giovanni's Room* in particular has been a victim of this, although with an interesting twist. As Marlon Ross writes:

> Everyone assumed that Baldwin was homosexual because he had chosen to write a novel about same-gender love. This is ironic, considering that as a black man, he was also writing a novel about "white" characters in which whiteness itself – or Baldwin's own blackness – was apparently not an issue.[83]

The scholarship surrounding *Giovanni's Room* is illustrative of what the "troubling presence of the grotesque" can be seen to represent in the novel itself. The inability to categorize neither Baldwin's writing nor his personal identity has caused an anxiety similar to the one Judith Butler describes in her discussion of drag in

[83] Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," 16.

Gender Trouble. This anxiety, she argues, brings forth assumptions on the part of the observer thereby "uncovering" drag as more than simply an act of playful subversion:

> If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the "reality" of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks "reality," and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion.[84]

Giovanni's Room can be read similarly. The presence of homosexuality at the surface of the novel leads to the presumption that it reflects the reality of Baldwin's sexual identity. Why then, as Ross points out, does one not suppose that Baldwin is also white? The obvious reason of course is because blackness serves as a visible marker that for centuries (and for some still) was thought to reflect a state of being different than that of "being" white.[85] Could it be said that gender functions in the same fashion? Is it not believed that the external markers of dress, walk, mannerisms, speech, etc. reflect the internal reality of sex (whether we know the anatomy of the individual or not)? One assumes that the man dressed as a woman is "impersonating femaleness" in the same way critics have charged Baldwin with "playing white" or fantasizing himself into a reality to which he does not have access.[86] He cannot however – due to the more contagious category of deviant sexuality, especially as it

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[84] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990, 1999) xxii.

[85] There are of course important instances where the "visible marker" of race is absent in those who are still labeled "black", thus causing a similar panic of categorization. For a useful analysis on the boundaries of race and how it relates to gender performance, see Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, in which she offers a useful analysis of this phenomenon through an alternative reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing.*

[86] It is important to point out that the assumption that Baldwin *desires* to be white is and has been a part of the criticism surrounding his writing since the publication of *Giovanni's Room.* This can be seen as similar to the way in which one assumes that a man in drag desires to be a woman, whether one knows the interior of the person or not. This accusation is a whole other conversation that holds very little relevance to the notions of an internal essence or self that I argue *Giovanni's Room* complicates.

entwines with race – imagine himself into the reality of being homosexual without it being an expression of his true self.

In the case of *Giovanni's Room* then, there are two presupposed "ostensible realities," that is Baldwin's blackness and gayness, that stand behind one unreality, the whiteness of his characters. Baldwin's ability to "put on" the category of whiteness in his novel without being labeled white coupled with his inability to portray homosexuality without being labeled as such illustrates Butler's point that "even 'seeing' [reading] the body may not answer the question [of identity]: for *what are the categories through which one sees?*"[87] Just as drag problemetizes notions of an essentialized gender or sex, *Giovanni's Room* takes race out of its position as a substantive reality, and places it instead on decidedly uncertain ground.

From this Butlerian conception of drag one can engage in a different reading of *Giovanni's Room* than that offered by Cora Kaplan and Marlon Ross. Reading it as a "book in drag" can serve to debunk the "realities" of race and gender as they continue to operate in the background of one another, oftentimes finding their strongest articulation through one another. Additionally, exposing this dual performance present in *Giovanni's Room* makes it possible to release the novel from its stigmatized place in the Baldwin canon and instead "make visible, as visible as the wafers on the shirt of the flaming princess [the novel's] insistent possibilities."[88]

> I stand at the window of this great house in the south of France as night falls, the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life. I have a drink in my hand, there is a bottle at my elbow. I watch my *reflection* in the *darkening* gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have *seen* many times. My ancestors

[87] Butler, Gender Trouble xxii.(italics author's).
[88] James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room (New York: Dell Publishing, 1956) 59.

> conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past.[89]

So begins our introduction to David, a quintessential American man who has escaped to a foreign land under the guise of "finding himself."[90] Implicit in this uniquely American phrase is the belief that there exists a self to find and that it is the individual who is responsible for that discovery. Yet, the self that David discovers in America and that he subsequently fails to circumvent in France stands outside the possibilities contained within the heterosexual frame demanded of American masculinity. It is within this frame that, throughout the novel, David is continually trying to position his manhood. Losing this frame would risk losing the very language that renders his identity intelligible at all. As Judith Butler writes,

> The terror and anxiety in 'becoming gay' [is] the fear of losing one's place in gender or of not knowing who one will be if one sleeps with someone of the ostensibly 'same' gender. This constitutes a certain crisis in ontology at the level of both sexuality and language.[91]

We see this terror in David's recounting of the night he first sleeps with a boy. This terror is doubled in that David's homosexuality not only renders his gendered identity uncertain, but his raced identity as well. For, in the decidedly racialized language of the opening paragraph above as well as in the description of the night of David "awakening" to same-sex desire, we are introduced to the way race will work in the background of the novel as the means through which notions of gender and sexual desire find their expression.

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[89] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 7. (italics mine)
[90] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 31.
[91] Butler, Gender Trouble xi.

At the memory of the night that he and Joey "gave each other joy" David is filled with a "thirsty heat."[92] They had performed the act of love in which it seemed a lifetime would not be long enough to exhaust the ritual. Yet, it was an experience that was to be bounded by the night just as Joey's dark body represented the boundary beyond which David fears he would fall into the abyss. Terror consumes him and Joey's "dark, beautiful, brown body" quickly transforms into "the black opening of a cavern in which [he] would be tortured till madness came, in which [he] would lose [his] manhood."[93]

David's body becomes jeopardized by Joey's through its perceived threat to his maleness. To prove all-encompassing, it becomes a black hole that will consume not only David's gendered body, but his cerebral self as well:

> A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion…I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me.[94]

His future in the cavern as "black, full of rumor, suggestion" makes David's past take on the mythic purity of the Garden of Eden.[95] Among the many things that the image of Biblical origins conjures up, is the pristine prototype of divinely mandated heterosexuality. Through this myth and others, heterosexuality has succeeded in setting itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; thus implying that all experiences standing outside that norm are merely "a copy, an imitation, a

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[92] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 14.
[93] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 15.
[94] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 15.
[95] In a scene at the opening of the novel on the morning of Giovanni's execution, David runs into Jacques, an acquaintance of David's and Giovanni's we learn more about later in the novel. In talking of Giovanni, David claims it would have been better if he had "stayed down there in Italy and planted his olive trees and had lots of children and beaten his wife." To which Jacques responds, "Nobody can stay in their Garden of Eden." (Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 35.)

derivative example, *a shadow of the real*."[96] Whiteness serves as a partner in this effort through its proclamation of purity that always has at its base notions of sexuality. Thus, if David were to lose this foundation of heterosexuality, the rest of his identity as a white man is left vulnerable.

As if trying to find the answer to this crisis of origin, David gives a recounting of his own. We learn his mother died when David was five and though he does not remember her, she figures into his nightmares

> blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive. I dare not describe this dream, which seemed disloyal to my mother.[97]

Later, David describes his mother as always watching from her photograph in the living room. When his aunt spoke of what a remarkable woman she was, David was uncomfortable, feeling he "had no right to be the son of such a mother."[98]

Kaplan claims that David's repudiation of Joey fuses with the memory of his dead mother to signal the threat posed by an identification with the feminine. David's mother, in Kaplan's view, represents "an engulfing maternal femininity in which birth, played backward, swallows men alive."[99] From there, Kaplan goes on to use her description of David's mother to outline the terror that each of the living women in the novel embody.

Kaplan's conflation of the spectrum of femininities represented in the novel is troubling on a number of levels. The harshness of her charge that the women of

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[96] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," The Lesbian and Gay Reader, ed. Barale Abelove, Halperin (New York: 1993).
[97] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 17.
[98] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 21.
[99] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 41.

Giovanni's Room represent the "most purely misogynist images in Baldwin's entire oeuvre" constituting an attack that "is unrepeated in Baldwin's earlier and later fiction" is revealing.[100] When taken with the fact that the novel is told entirely from the perspective of a white, middle-class American man undergoing a crisis of masculinity one must wonder whether or not Kaplan is truly seeing all that is there or merely blending the misogynistic thoughts of a protagonist whom the reader is meant to despise with the motivations of the author who created him.

In returning to David's dead mother, Judith Butler can, once again, offer a useful perspective. Using Freudian's conception of idealization as quoted by Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, David's mother can be seen to take on a more structural role rather than a representative one.

Freud argues that the idealization of a young boy's mother is nothing more than his own narcissism "transferred outward, that the mother promises the return of that narcissism and insofar as *she carries it*, she is perceived to *withhold it from him.* Idealization, then, is always at the expense of the ego who idealizes."[101] Butler detaches this notion of idealization from the drama between boy child and mother to underscore the consequences of idealization itself. The ego-ideal, according to Freud, "lays the groundwork for the super-ego and the super-ego is lived as the psychic activity of 'watching' and, from the perspective that is the ego, the experience of 'being watched.'"[102] Within this Freudian framework the superego – for which the mother is its first representative – arises as a regulator of norms that serve to produce

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[100] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 42.
[101] Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (New York: Routledge, 1993) 180.
[102] Ibid.

ideal "men" and "women." It differs from the ego and the ego-ideal in that it stands back and measures the former against the latter, always finding the ego lacking.

In this conceptual formation then, David's mother can be seen as the superego, watching as he fails to live up to the ideal of white, heterosexual masculinity. As such, Baldwin characterizes her posthumously so that she can serve as representative of the "set of norms by which the sexes are differentiated and installed."[103] David's mother then is better identified, not with the feminine as Kaplan says, but rather with the ideals and norms that govern sexual and racial difference. For the way David describes the power his mother wields evokes images of an invisible force still at work rather than the haunting memories of a dead parent:

> She looked out of the photograph frame, a pale, blonde woman, delicately put together, dark-eyed, and straight browed, with a nervous, gentle mouth. But something about the way the eyes were set in the head and stared straight out, something very faintly sardonic and knowing in the set of the mouth suggested that, somewhere beneath this tense fragility was a strength as various as it was unyielding…dangerous because it was so entirely unexpected.[104]

In this passage, immediate attention is drawn to her paleness and blonde hair making her whiteness part of the strength she embodies. It is this unexpected power born out of a "tense fragility" that threatens to "swallow him alive." Whiteness, (like heterosexuality as is has been defined here) can also be described as fragile because it is forced to continue asserting itself in the face of contradiction. Without the existence of its ego to invest it with power, the superego would fall from its position as purveyor of societal norms. Ruth Frankenberg in *White Women, Race Matters* describes whiteness as a "'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at

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[103] Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex 181.
[104] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 20.

ourselves, at others and at society."[105] From her fixed position in the photograph, David's mother provides us with insight into the set of standards that David will use as the novel continues to unfold.

Throughout the novel, Baldwin uses various kinds of reflections to mirror David's own performance of a reality that does not exist, that is, heterosexual masculinity. The racialized nature of these images then belies the instability of David's own racial identity as it is intertwined with his gendered and sexual one. Yet, in losing his male gendered body and by extension, his masculinity within Joey's dark cavernous body, he does not *become* black in the way that he can *become* a homosexual. This distinction is important if trying to conflate the way in which racial and sexual difference operates within society. As Ross points out,

> Given the invisibility of whiteness as a racially constricted burden of desire, however, Baldwin also shows how even the most deeply taboo and widely outlawed desire can be cushioned by the privileged invisibility of whiteness.[106]

With the invisible cloak of whiteness in place then, Baldwin takes us through a meditation on desire within and across sex and race. Because white, middle-class American society denies homosexuality at its surface, Paris provides the setting in which David's desire can be articulated, yet does nothing to answer our protagonist's most relenting question: What is it that I want? Whiteness makes this question David's alone. For, as Marlon Ross so astutely points out, if David were black, "the novel would have been read as being 'about' blackness, whatever else it happened to

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[105] Ruth Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matter: The Social Construction of Whiteness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 1.
[106] Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," 25.

be about…Nobody asks: What does the white man want?"[107] Conversely, if John Grimes' same-sex desire had been made more overt in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* readers would conflate his racial identity with his sexual identity, (re)tying blackness to sexual deviance. In making David white *and* homosexual, whiteness can become "abnormalized," in an attempt to trouble what centuries of white supremacist thought has perpetuated. As EL Kornegay, Jr. writes:

> Colonial thought ensured that the abnormally grotesque essence of blackness would come to validate the normativity of whiteness through the racialization of black sexuality and the sexualization of black identity (sexual deviancy is the reason for blacks being oppressed). The conflation of black identity and sexual deviancy has created an 'archetypal Other.'[108]

White, male, heterosexuality then provides the "paradigm of normality" or to use more Butlerian language, the "eternal subject" through which blacks seek to overcome their fundamental otherness. We saw a puritanical black heterosexuality 'pole' used by the characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to claim an identity beyond the 'Other' of blackness. Yet, what Kornegay argues, and what we see in the failings of Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth, is that

> If we continue to limit our understanding to binaries of male/female, white/black, so-called gay/so-called straight, saved/sinner, we will never destabilize the colonial construction of our imposed grotesqueness and be truly transformed.[109]

Aware of this dichotomous discourse, Baldwin, in *Giovanni's Room* plays along the boundaries of sameness and difference. The objects of David's desire are marked with a dark difference, yet are not explicitly "black." Through portraying

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[107] Ross, "White Fantasies of Desire," 25.
[108] Jr. EL Kornegay, "Queering Black Homophobia: Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation," Theology and Sexuality (2004): 33.
[109] EL Kornegay, "Queering Black Homophobia: Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation," 34.

"desire across (racial) sameness" in this way, Baldwin is (among other things) parodying the disavowal of "desire across (racial) difference" that exists within the white psyche. He (re)places the grotesqueness of sexual and gendered indiscretion onto white faces and bodies thereby disturbing the pattern of white, male, heterosexual rearticulation upon which the survival of these binaries depends.

A bizarre and loaded scene of *Giovanni's Room* that is rarely mentioned in its scholarship enacts some of the themes outlined above. The scene in question takes place early on when David is recalling the night he and Giovanni meet.

David has been in Paris for over a year and having run out of money, he calls on Jacques, an acquaintance for whom he has little respect and even less affection. Jacques takes him out to dinner and they end up at a bar of "dubious – or perhaps not dubious at all, of rather too emphatic – reputation."[110] With pretentious inflection, David paints a portrait of its frequenters. From the Parisian ladies with their gigolos to an animalistic description of the "parrot-like fairies" who call each other "she," David's perception provides plenty of imperialistic distance between this "new" world and himself.[111]

David recalls being appalled in hearing about a boy who frequents the bar at night "wearing makeup and earrings and with his heavy blond hair piled high. Sometimes he actually wore a skirt and high heels." Although, he was reportedly very nice, David confesses

> his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's

[110] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 37.
[111] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 37-38.

> stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings.[112]

The conjuring up of racial tropes in this passage heightens David's positioning as a white, American, male who cannot feel at ease with the indeterminacy of any binary be it male to female, black to white or human to animal. For the resemblance between monkeys and humans breaks down the much needed evolutionary and psychic distance between "beasts and men" in a similar way that, we shall see, a drag queen makes narrow the chasm separating male and female.

Kaplan, however reads this scene differently. She claims that in it, "Baldwin's denial of the erotics of the grotesque or perverse surfaces strongly."[113] Here again, Kaplan forgets with whose eyes we are taking in this scene. As if anticipating this charge Kaplan defends her analysis in this way:

> In fact, neither his [David's] colonizing gaze nor his visceral response is ever disavowed. Read intertextually with Baldwin's essays, it is striking how close David's reflex of disgust, if divested of its racialized undertones, is to Baldwin's expressive distaste for homosexual cultures.[114]

The major flaw in her defense comes with her suggestion that one divest the scene of its racialized undertones. In being a "white" novel, *Giovanni's Room* has already been read in a way that "divests it of its racialized undertones." Kaplan only contributes to this problematic reading in failing to "suspend her disbelief" and allow David to speak for himself.

Upon their arrival to the bar with a "dubious reputation," both Jacques and David become instantly aware of the presence of an "insolent and dark" new barman,

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[112] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 39.
[113] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 43.
[114] Kaplan, "A Cavern Opened in My Mind," 44.

Giovanni. It is not long before David and Giovanni are engaged in flirtatious banter. Their chatter continues for quite some time before Giovanni is called from the bar to attend a table. Without the distraction of conversation, David takes notices of the crowd around him which has been observing the mating ritual taking place between Giovanni and him. Those whom David has recently described with the aloofness and repulsion of an arrogant anthropologist are now shifting their gaze onto him. Overcome with feelings of fear and fate he reasons, "It had taken some time but the tables had been turned; now I was in the zoo, and they were watching."[115] As if on cue, a creature approaches David from the shadows.

> It looked like a mummy or a zombie…it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness…the eyelids gleamed with mascara, the mouth raged with lipstick. The face was white and thoroughly bloodless with some kind of foundation cream; it stank of powder and a gardenia-like perfume.[116]

In David's encounter with this drag queen, we can see that the queen's performance of femaleness while "being" male reflects David's struggle to perform the "correct" order of desire mandated by his race and sex. "It did not seem real. He did not seem real"[117] because David own identity as normal is not real. The phantasmic nature of the drag queen illustrates the phantom of white, heterosexual masculinity that David is continually trying to impersonate and failing.

Drag, Butler argues, disrupts this linear understanding (that an anatomical sex leads to an externally recognizable gender which leads to an expression of desire) through failing to retrospectively confirm that a certain enactment of gender follows from a certain corresponding sex. In other words, drag is not an imitation or copy of

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[115] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 53.
[116] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 54.
[117] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 55.

some prior gender, but rather it "enacts the very structure of impersonation by which any gender is assumed."[118] Drag then serves as a metaphor for the way in which genders are "appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation or approximation."[119]

There is something else at work in David's description of his interaction with the drag queen. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark,* writes of "images of impenetrable whiteness" in early American writing. One such image is found in Edgar Allan Poe's, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in which "the images of the white curtain and the 'shrouded human figure' with skin 'the perfect whiteness of snow' both occur after the narrative has encountered blackness."[120]

In the moments the figure of the cross-dresser is moving towards David, he cannot name it. His narrative sketch seems more applicable to a supernatural and terrifying force than to a human being with its "white and thoroughly bloodless face." It is not until the final sentence of the paragraph that David refers to 'it' as 'he'. Even more revealing is their brief conversation in which the queen issues David this warning, speaking of Giovanni: "'*Il est dangereux, tu sais.* And for a boy like you – he is *very* dangerous.'"[121]

From what the reader already knows about the outcome of their love affair, this warning should strike as terribly ironic and heighten the reflexive purpose of the drag queen. For, as we know, it is Giovanni, not David, who finds himself on his way to the Guillotine by the end of the narrative. The assumed "shadow of the real" that

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[118] Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 312.
[119] Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 313.
[120] Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 32.
[121] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 55.

the drag queen embodies is thus mapped onto David's identity struggle which eventually leads to the death of the dark object of his desire. In the same way that Morrison argues, the white presences

> appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness – a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing.[122]

The completion of this performance and its racial symbolism can be read into a scene that occurs later in the book on the day David finds out about Hella's return to Paris; the event that incites his escape from Giovanni's room. David receives two letters that day, one from Hella and one from his father. His father's letter confirms for David that in his absence his father had begun

> living, obviously, in a pit of suspicions which daily became blacker and vaguer. The question he longed to ask was not in the letter and neither was the offer: *Is it a woman, David? Bring her on home…and I will help you get set up.* "[123]

David's father did not ask this question because if the answer is no, and there is no woman to link them in their masculinity, the fact that they had become nothing but strangers would be exposed.

In the midst of mourning his masculinity and preparing to take it back through ending it with Giovanni and reuniting with Hella, another figure emerges except this time instead of from the shadows, from a "sunlit foreign avenue."

> There was a sailor, dressed all in white, coming across the boulevard…I was staring at him, though I did not know it, and wishing I were he. He seemed – somehow – younger than I had ever been, and blonder and more beautiful, and he wore his masculinity as

[122] Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination 33.
[123] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 121.

> unequivocally as he wore his skin…I wondered if my father had ever been like that, if I had ever been like that – though it was hard to imagine, for this boy, striding across the avenue like light itself, any antecedents, any connections at all.[124]

The image of the sailor represents in David's mind everything the drag queen obscures. His maleness and masculinity are "unequivocal," his (authentic) blondness and beauty suggests purity that stands in stark contrast to the "horrifying lasciviousness" of the drag queen. His whiteness and heterosexuality, as previously noted, gain much of their staying power through presenting themselves as not "having any antecedents at all."

The letter from his father completes the estrangement from David's heterosexual "origins" that the description of his mother began at the opening of the novel. He cannot let his "old man in on the secret" for he stands as a living example of David's failure to uphold the ideal of masculinity; an ideal that should have been passed down to him via his father. Rather than questioning the ideal that neither he nor his father have ever been able to embody or successfully perform, David (re)invests it with envy onto the body of the sailor. This sight seems to embolden him in the act of taking back the masculinity he has lost within the body of Giovanni.

David learns of Giovanni death sentence a few weeks after he leaves him to return to Hella. Soon after this is when Hella's body becomes the grotesque figuration of Kaplan's argument. David becomes "fantastically intimidated" by all that used to delight him about her. With Giovanni heading to the guillotine, David's guilty desires rise to the surface so ferociously that he can no longer even perform the act of love

[124]Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 121.

with Hella. He flees from her and she finds him in Nice with a sailor, only to discover what she has known all along.

As if to console her, David says, "If I was lying, I wasn't lying to *you*…I was lying to myself."[125] Thinking that his quest after identity does not include defining those around him further reflects David's privileged place on the power structure. His need to live up to a heterosexual, masculine ideal necessarily means relegating the objects of his desire to its ideological counterpoint, femininity. The moments when this feminization takes place are the moments when his own failure to embody masculinity is most apparent. They are grotesque in their hyper-femininity because they serve as a reflection of the "crude hyper-masculinity" Kaplan concedes Baldwin eloquently details. Rather than interpreting these instances as an attempt to "rescue" a homoerotic masculinity from being engulfed by the feminine, it can be argued that Baldwin is attempting to reach beyond the categories of feminine and masculine and trouble the very notions of a stable sex that appears as David's focus at the close of *Giovanni's Room*.

In the final pages of the novel, David imagines Giovanni's journey to the knife while he prepares to leave Paris. Coming full circle, we return to the window pane and David's reflection that is "fading before [his] eyes." As he begins to undress, he becomes "terribly aware" of the mirror in the room. This time, instead of seeing his reflection, David sees the face of Giovanni "like an unexpected latern on a dark, dark night."[126] The dark object of David's desire upon which he has meditated his fears and longings now effaces his own reflection.

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[125] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 216.
[126]Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 221.

David imagines Giovanni walking along the corridor to the office of the priest where he will be read his last rites. The virgin watches Giovanni and *"Mary, blessed mother of God"* is repeated twice harking back to images of David's mother at the beginning of the novel, standing as the silent judge and upholder of the social order. In the end, David's complacency in this ruthless system has sacrificed the body of Giovanni as well as sentenced his own body to death. As he stands in front of the mirror studying his genitals David wonders how it can be redeemed. The key to his salvation, David reasons, is hidden in his flesh. It is found in his inability to reckon with the history that is contained in his skin and in his genitals. History that is referenced in the opening paragraph of the novel and links Giovanni to the sacrifice made by David's ancestors who pushed "across death-laden plains" and began to build the American identity from which David traveled "back" to Europe to escape.[127]

The last image of David is one of him leaving his Paris home with "the dreadful weight of hope" on his shoulders. He tears up the envelope containing a letter from Jacques informing him of Giovanni's execution date and throws the pieces into the wind. The deed has been done; the sacrifice has been made and he, the white man, has made it out alive. This image contains no real assurance that David is any closer to "finding himself" than he was when he left America. Nor does it seem that it is Baldwin's intention to do so. The pieces of the letter blowing back at David offer the final indication that David will continue to hide behind the assumed masculinity contained in his whiteness even as he is constantly reminded of its fallacy. For in imagining the death of Giovanni rather than reading of its reality and assuming his

[127] Baldwin, Giovanni's Room 7.

responsibility for it, David has forever alienated himself from experiencing desire that is not predicated on an illusion.

It would have been very easy for Baldwin to continue to write ostensibly "black" novels following the reception of *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* Moreover, it is difficult – sixty years later – to fully grasp the professional and personal risk involved in publishing *Giovanni's Room.* In doing so, Baldwin set out to show aspects of a white American psyche rarely explored by his contemporaries, black or white. The response of critics reveals as much about the effects of this identity construction as that which is contained in the novel itself. In eliciting such an uneasy reaction, *Giovanni's Room* illustrates the discomfort found when one begins to lose control over definitions. Those who tend to be in control of these definitions are particularly vulnerable to this discomfort. Drag, similarly causes anxiety within the mind of the gazer to "fit" the object of his or her gaze into an easily accessible category. Thus, it provides an apt vehicle through which we can access the potential of Baldwin's second novel; the novel that arguably changed the course of his literary career forever.

"A failure on the grand scale"
Another Country as queer text

Another Country, James Baldwin's third novel is generally seen as his most ambitious and controversial. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*'s success coupled with the positive reception of his first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* fostered anticipation that his next novel would be a "broad, sweeping social critique" that would galvanize the nation.[128] In the eyes of most critics, new and old, Baldwin missed his (their) target. For instance Robert Bone in his 1965 book, *The Negro Novel in America* claims that *Another Country* was "a failure on the grand scale."[129]

Bone's primary criticism of *Another Country* – which has been (re)articulated in various ways by other literary scholars at the time and since – is that "Baldwin's literary aims are deflected by his sexual mystique."[130] Bone's presumption of Baldwin's literary aims and how he failed to reach them in *Another Country* is a reflection of the bind within which we have seen critics place Baldwin before.

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[128] As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Giovanni's Room* from the very beginning was conveniently overlooked as an aberration from the talent that was apparent in Baldwin's other two early works. Yet, the lack of critical attention to the novel belies the influence the novel had on Baldwin's public persona; the suspicions surrounding his sexuality had been enlivened only to become solidified with the publication of *Another Country*. What made *Another Country* more controversial than *Giovanni's Room* was its "interracial" nature. It seems that as long as homosexuality is contained within the bodies of white characters, the novel could avoid being further scandalized.

[129] Robert A. Bone, "James Baldwin," The Negro Novel in America, ed. Robert A. Bone (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) 214.

[130] Bone, "James Baldwin," 216.

Notions that sexual identity and racial identity are mutually exclusive categories has led to the assumption that Baldwin's novels in which (homo)sexuality is a theme threaten to efface his more "authentic" racial concerns contained in his essays. The literary criticism of *Another Country,* more than any of his other novels – in portraying both black and white characters as well as "gay" and "straight" characters – contains the most blatant suggestions that Baldwin's racial and sexual alliances are in conflict.[131]

In an effort to rescue Baldwin from this identity tug of war, other critics have projected universalized (read: white) redemptive themes such as love, privacy, self-awareness and artistic discovery onto *Another Country.*[132] Yet, doing so has been at the expense of literary honesty. For there is very little evidence in *Another Country* that these things are in fact the redemptive forces these critics claim them to be. The absence of a close reading of the novel in these cases leads critics to fall back on an autobiographical reading. For instance, James A. Dievler in "Sexual Exiles," charts the artistic journey of three "artists" in the novel – characters he claims are "manifestations of Baldwin himself" – alongside his understanding of Baldwin's own

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[131] The most extreme example of this type of criticism is the oft quoted Eldridge Cleaver's, *Soul on Ice* in which he accuses Baldwin of hating black people and desiring to be "inseminated by the white man." Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968). With more complexity, yet no less problematically, Terry Rowan takes up this charge by claiming that the character of Rufus in *Another Country* is "at best…the depiction of a pathology that is never explicitly acknowledged, a case of internalized racism of almost Frankensteinian proportions." Terry Rowden, "A Play of Abstractions: Race, Sexuality, and Community in James Baldwin's Another Country," Southern Review (Baton Rouge, LA) 29.1 (1993): 41.

[132] William Cohen, for instance, offers a nuanced analysis of how the relationship between race, sexuality and gender operates in the novel. In the end however, Cohen makes a similar move to the aforementioned critics through asserting that sexuality is "an act that is always personal, never political" reaffirming the perceived mutual exclusive and dichotomized nature of Baldwin's racial and sexual concerns. William A. Cohen, "Liberalism, Libido, Liberation: Baldwin's Another Country," Genders 12 (1991).

journey. This kind of reading of Baldwin's fiction, as we have seen in other cases, severely limits its exegetic possibilities.[133]

In response to the faulty scholarship outlined above, two pieces have emerged on *Another Country* that attempt to avoid others' trappings and largely succeed. The first is an essay by Susan Feldman in which she attempts to redeem "Baldwin's belief in the redemptive quality of love and sexuality…because the paradigms through which this belief has been interpreted seem to strip his novels of so much of their political content."[134] Feldman is particularly writing in response to the likes of William Cohen who, as a reflection of dominant discourses, would like for sexuality to remain a private issue. Through what she sees as a "linking [of] the repression of same-sex desire to America's past and present oppression of African Americans" in *Another Country*, Feldman seeks to dispel the myth that sexuality and sexual desire has ever been separated from the political.[135] Furthermore, despite white patriarchal efforts to project them onto the bodies of "others," these desires are constantly resisting stabilizing onto a fixed identity. Feldman claims that this is why Baldwin always frames his representations of same-sex desire (between men) within the

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[133] James Dievler, "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and Another Country," James Baldwin Now, ed. Dwight McBride (New York: New York University Press, 1999). It should also be noted that with few exceptions, all of the essayists in McBride's anthology make liberal use of Baldwin's personal life and identity in their literary criticism. Reasons for this, I suspect, stem from McBride's implicit (sometimes explicit) attempt to cease "privileging the category of race over all other forms of difference" when it comes to Baldwin scholarship. Instead, it seems his aim to read Baldwin from a black, gay male positioning. While this effort is fruitful at times, situating Baldwin (and Baldwin's works) as firmly as McBride does within the label 'homosexual' further relegates Baldwin to an identity he spent most of his life (and more importantly, his writing) resisting.

[134] Susan Feldman, "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen, ed. D. Quentin Miller (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000) 89.

[135] Feldman, "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," 89.

context of bisexuality. Thus, in Feldman we see the first critical mention of a consistently overlooked aspect in Baldwin's writing.

The second piece is that of Kevin Ohi entitled, "'I am not the boy you want': Sexuality, 'race,' and thwarted revelation in Baldwin's *Another Country*." In it, Ohi takes on readings such as Dievler's that cast (non-hetero) sexuality and (non-white) race as epistemological states of exile which can only be overcome through self-discovery and acceptance. He claims that whether expressed in homophobic or racist, or anti-homophobic or anti-racist rhetoric, critics have read the message to *Another Country* to be that transcendence can only be found through coming to terms with one's identity. Ohi addresses those (like McBride and Rowden) who focus on "questions of 'race' or sexuality – or on their relation – [and] often do not escape the structuring pull of a privileged transcendence that casts either one, the other, or both as unfortunate obstructions that might, with majestic artistic clarification, be surpassed."[136] For example, Dievler postulates that Baldwin urges his "New Yorkers [in the novel] forward to 'another country' where they have relationships free of the identity categories that created the sexual culture he lamented."[137] Instead of this sort of easy absolving of difference by means of transcending a stifling sexual culture, Ohi calls for a reading of the revelation and self-awareness present in the text as in a constant state of conflict and incompletion.

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[136] Kevin Ohi, "'I'm Not the Boy You Want': Sexuality, 'Race', and Thwarted Revelation in Baldwin's Another Country," African American Review (Saint Louis Univ., St. Louis) 33.2 (1999): 261.
[137] Dievler, "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and Another Country," 181.

Importantly, Ohi also strays away from limited readings based on the "politics of representation" found in critics like Cohen and Rowden.[138] Ohi writes, "The novel's politics need not be read solely in terms of its plot and that a homology between what it 'depicts' and a concept of political intervention modeled on representational politics need not structure a critical response to this text."[139] In other words, to read the characters of the novel only as representatives of their certain race, gender or sexuality is a common trapping among literary scholarship, particularly Baldwin's.

Despite the continual practice of critics to the contrary, *Another Country* seems to aim at making these types of readings problematic. Through assuming conflicting categories of identity and forming relationships that defy the dominant social order, the characters live out the ambiguous and contradictory language of *Another Country*. The perspective of the narrative is also constantly in flux, forcing the reader to identify across lines of difference thereby making categorical judgments based on representation difficult.

Throughout the novel, the revelation that visits upon the characters most often is the realization that their socially constructed identities, i.e. gay/straight, black/white, male/female, wealthy/poor fail to contain their desires and experiences. This knowledge is nearly taken for granted given the fact that the majority of the characters enact deviant expressions of desire. However, unlike what some critics have argued *Another Country* does not stop there and claim that sexual deviancy

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[138] Cohen claims that the political world *Another Country* creates "cannot imaging the inclusion of women, lesbians, and intraracial black relationships because they are not represented as successful or not represented at all." Cohen 15.

[139] Ohi, "'I'm Not the Boy You Want': Sexuality, 'Race', and Thwarted Revelation in Baldwin's Another Country," 263.

contains the path to transcendence. For if read honestly, it is clear that sexual relationships, even love, are not enough to lift the shroud of ignorance or to dispel the destructive power of knowledge that form along lines of race, gender, sexuality and class. As Feldman writes

> The very fact that *Another Country* focuses more on love's inability to transcend social barriers for the only black male character suggests that Baldwin in no way regarded love, and its expression through sexuality, to be seen as a magical elixir capable of overcoming the psychological and social damage from oppressive social structures. On the contrary, in the case of *Another Country*, Baldwin depicts how love too often is seized as a means of self-avoidance, as a means of distancing oneself from one's past and one's responsibility to others.[140]

While Feldman is right to suggest that *Another Country* indeed does not consider love as the "magical elixir," her reasoning that this is so lies in her assertion that love could not save Rufus, whom she calls "the figure for [Baldwin's] own self-representation."[141] Her contention risks falling into the politics of representation that assume Baldwin, in his writing, is always purposefully engaged in "self-representation." Rather, despite moments of beauty and revelation – more often than not accompanying an orgasm – love, as a (momentarily) redeeming force is not reserved for any character in the novel. Even Eric, the ostensibly white, male character whom critics are eager to see as the novel's "sexual savior" and who seems to possess the "self-knowledge" needed to free the rest from their ignorance, is burdened by the same weight.

> He thought of Yves, thought of him with sorrow that was close to panic, feeling doubly faithless, feeling that the principal support of his

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[140] Feldman, "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," 89.
[141] Feldman, "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," 90.

> life had shifted – had shifted and would shift again, might fail beneath the dreadful, the accumulating and secret weight.[142]

The rhythm of secrets – both those locked in the past and those just beyond reach in the present – drives the movement of the novel just as the mysterious and improvisational melodies of the blues litter its surface. Rufus Scott as the jazz singer and the "only black male character" is the embodiment – and after his suicide – the disembodiment of this "secret weight" that refuses to be decoded.

In the first paragraph of the novel Baldwin introduces us to Rufus, his paradoxical existence, and the "murderous" city in which the movement of the novel will take place. Rufus wanders New York City, homeless and hungry, "entirely alone, and dying of it, he was part of an unprecedented multitude."[143] The "unprecedented multitude" of which Rufus is both estranged from and a part ties him to notions of American identity as an empty categorization that simultaneously contains infinite meanings; meanings that can only be found through disavowing the past. This, however, is a luxury Rufus, unlike Vivaldo and Eric, the white, male characters of the novel, is not afforded. His blackness makes him the bearer of his own history as well as the invented history of his white, male countrymen. This fact is illustrated in Rufus's early reminiscing about Leona, the poor, white, Southern women with whom he has a relationship.

> He remembered Leona…For to remember Leona was also – somehow – to remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father, the beauty of his sister. It was to remember the streets of Harlem, the boys on the stoops, the girls behind the stairs and on the roofs, the white policeman who had taught him how to hate…It was to remember the beat.[144]

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[142] James Baldwin, Another Country (New York: Vintage International, 1960) 393.
[143] Baldwin, Another Country 4.
[144] Baldwin, Another Country 6.

The memory of Leona is linked to these other memories because, as we soon learn, Leona was the unfortunate depository for the rage of history that had accumulated within Rufus's gendered and sexually marked body. In a useful, yet perhaps overly simplistic linear analysis, Feldman describes the violence enacted upon Leona by Rufus as an illustration of "how the violent denial of racial equality can result in the violent denial of sexual equality between men and women."[145] She claims that in destroying Leona, Rufus is transposing racial rage into sexual rage in an attempt to reaffirm the masculinity, that he, as a black man has been denied. This causational logic flirts with a fruitless and misleading assumption that racial difference precedes and thus results in sexual difference. Claiming that Rufus is enacting an amassment of racial rage onto Leona effaces the importance of his sexual identity.

We are informed of Rufus's same-sex desire soon after he recalls his first night with Leona. Hunger leads him to stand outside a bar and grille where he is offered a sandwich and drink for a "bleakly physical exchange."[146] Ultimately failing to follow through with the unspoken transaction, Rufus tells the man simply, "I am not the boy you want, mister."[147]

These words bring the memory of Eric painfully to the surface of Rufus's consciousness. Eric, Vivaldo and Rufus met as three struggling artists in Greenwich Village. At the time of Rufus's death, Eric has long since fled New York City to Paris presumably to escape the pain Rufus had inflicted on him. The reader is introduced to

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[145] Feldman, "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," 93.
[146] Baldwin, Another Country 42.
[147] Baldwin, Another Country 44.

Eric and his Parisian lover, Yves in Book Two where she learns of more of his history and where Rufus enters.

Both white and Southern, Eric and Leona's gendered and sexed bodies provided the avenue through which Rufus symbolically obtained power over whiteness. Their white skin is what made Rufus hate them even while he loved them. "Rufus had despised him because he came from Alabama; perhaps he had allowed Eric to make love to him in order to despise him more completely."[148]

It is in this sentiment that we get a glimpse of the function of sex in the novel. Rather than being superfluous and distracting, as Bone claims, sex is used to both trouble and solidify the boundaries of identity within which the characters are imprisoned. The act of sex provides a space for Rufus and the other characters to rebel against their socially prescribed identities. Though there are moments of beauty and clarity and even love in these acts, they bring no real or sustained revelation.

Sex between Rufus and Leona is a battle that transcends the place and time in which they wrestle with their respective identities and relation to one another. Their first sexual encounter moves quickly from an expression of a slow journey home to a violent rape scene: "And shortly, nothing could stop him, not the white God himself or a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs."[149]

In acting out the white male fantasy of miscegenation – for the moments preceding climax – Rufus and Leona cease being individuals and instead become embodiments of what history has made them. As black man and white woman they

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[148] Baldwin, Another Country 45.
[149] Baldwin, Another Country 22.

form the gendered and sexualized categories upon which white, male heterosexual identity depends. Thus, their respective bodies serve to remind each other of the oppressive system under which they suffer. Yet, the system is structured in such a way to make it impossible for them to access the knowledge needed to escape seeing their oppressor in their lover's body. So, instead Leona becomes the "milk-white" vessel into which Rufus shoots enough "venom for a hundred black-white babies."

With Eric, Rufus reinscribes the same rigid and dichotomous gender roles found in compulsory heterosexuality that serve to destroy Leona. His sexual desire for Eric becomes instead a means of enacting revenge on a social order that denies Rufus his manhood:

> He had despised Eric's manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity. But Leona was not a deformity. And he had used against her the very epithets he had used against Eric, and in the very same way…[150]

This passage suggests that to distance himself from the doubly-marked deviance of sleeping with a man who was also white, Rufus entered into a heterosexual relationship with Leona, but found that his rage was the same. Treating Eric like a woman does not make Rufus a man in the same way that beating and raping Leona for her whiteness does not make Rufus any less black. For time and history contain the mystery that has coded Rufus' body this way and no act of sex, love, violence or friendship will erase it.

> Yet, he was aware, perhaps for the first time in his life that nothing would stop it, nothing: this was himself. He was flesh: flesh, bone, muscle, fluid, orifices, hair and skin. His body was controlled by laws he did not understand. Nor did he understand what force within this body had driven him into such a desolate place. The most impenetrable

[150] Baldwin, Another Country 46.

> of mysteries moved in this darkness for less than a second, hinting of reconciliation. And still the music continued.[151]

The music of Bessie Smith can be found in the background of many pivotal moments in the novel. The first we hear from her is on the night of Rufus' suicide in Vivaldo's apartment. Her lyrics spark the first hint of equilibrium for Rufus because in Smith's blues, he begins to hear "something that spoke to his troubled mind…he heard the line and the tone of the singer, and he wondered how others had moved beyond the emptiness and horror which faced him now."[152]

There are many things that the invocation of jazz conjures up. Most strikingly, the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, finds similar revelation in the blues of Louis Armstrong. In the prologue, he claims that it is his "invisibility" that aids him in understanding Armstrong's music.

> Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of times, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead of time and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where times stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.[153]

Rufus' own version of invisibility is also described in relation to a beat. "The beat: hands, feet, tambourines, drums, pianos, laughter, curses, razor blades…The beat – in Harlem in the summertime one could almost see it, shaking above the pavements and the roof."[154]

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[151] Baldwin, Another Country 54.
[152] Baldwin, Another Country 49.
[153] Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, 1994 Modern Library ed. (New York Random House, Inc., 1952) 8.
[154] Baldwin, Another Country 6.

Historically, the blues has been the means through which black people have "made poetry out of being invisible."[155] As an art form, it has also been a place of contestation and appropriation. It is to this that Baldwin draws our attention in deciding to reference Bessie Smith rather than Louis Armstrong or another male artist.

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith took a genre formally dominated by men and made it their own. Lyrically and in their own lives, they defied many traditional female tropes and disturbed many of the vicious binaries to which they were subjected.[156] Hence, there is an extra layer of "invisibility" or "life according to the beat" that exists within the music of blues women like Smith.

Rufus too, has many layers to his suffering. His battle (which he is presently losing) against the gendered, racial and sexual identity categories that seek to define him enables him to hear the "line and the tone" of Bessie's voice thus serving to link them. The irony, of course, is that her music is unable to connect him with Vivaldo: "Rufus watched the tall, clumsy white boy who was his best friend, and felt himself nearly strangling with the desire to hurt him."[157] Rufus's violent urge towards Vivaldo is born out of a frustration at Vivaldo's unself-reflexive whiteness that is generally cast as innocence. This connects Vivaldo to Leona in their mutual fear and misunderstanding of Rufus's actions.

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[155] Ellison, Invisible Man 8.
[156] For an incredibly comprehensive and interesting study of blues women and how they contributed to "feminism" and demonstrated some early black feminist thinking specifically, see Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Getrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1998).
[157] Baldwin, Another Country 50.

From the moment of Rufus and Leona's meeting, knowledge about one another is cast as dangerous and unnecessary. Leona tells Rufus in passing that she has moved north to make a new life for herself after her husband left her and her child was taken away. Instead of inquiring further, Rufus resists the temptation of his imagination to suggest that "Leona was a person and had her story."[158] Hearing her story would risk seeing Leona as an individual. "Knowing" her whiteness and her womanhood and nothing more creates the illusion that Rufus controls the only knowledge about her that could be dangerous. Yet, as we discover, his refusal to individualize Leona and in turn learn of her suffering as a woman, leaves him and her vulnerable to the "world and its power to hate and destroy."[159]

Leona's aversion to knowledge about Rufus mirrors Vivaldo's as they both believe that loving Rufus erases their disparate racial identities and experiences. When asked if people had "warned her down home about the darkies up North" Leona tells Rufus, "They didn't never worry me none. People's just people as far as I'm concerned."[160] In claiming to not "see" Rufus' color (and by extension, her own) Leona is incapable of crossing the gulf of ignorance that stands between them.

Similarly, with both Rufus and later, Rufus's sister, Ida, Vivaldo is constantly engaged in conflating and universalizing their experiences "as black people" with his experience "as a person."[161] For to admit that there is a certain suffering that is unique to being black in the world would risk admitting that there is a certain type of

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[158] Baldwin, Another Country 13.
[159] Baldwin, Another Country 27.
[160] Baldwin, Another Country 13.
[161] On the night of Rufus's suicide, Vivaldo says to Rufus, '"I know a lot of things hurt you that I can't really understand. A lot of things hurt me that *I* can't really understand" (50). And then at the end of the novel during the conversation in which Vivaldo learns about Ida's affair with Ellis, he tells her, '"Sweetheart, suffering doesn't *have* a color"' (417).

freedom or privilege enjoyed by nature of being white. And naming whiteness as a category which Vivaldo occupies would mean he would have to also confront his decidedly unstable heterosexual, masculine identity upon which his white privilege is built. Thus, we see in Vivaldo the disconnect – common among white liberals – between possessing an awareness of structures of racism and recognizing the self as a player in that system.

For instance, Vivaldo remembers the night he "rescues" Leona from Rufus's beatings. He and Leona leave the apartment and pass a police officer on the street. At the sight of the cop, Vivaldo feels a chill go through the body of Leona. This causes him to realize that he had never been afraid of policemen before.

> But now he felt the impersonality of the uniform, the emptiness of the streets. He felt what the policeman might say and do if he had been Rufus walking here with his arm around Leona.
> He said, nevertheless, after a moment, 'You ought to leave him. You ought to leave town.'[162]

Although he "feels" Rufus's fear being expressed through the body of Leona, Vivaldo still refuses to see that this fear bears a connection to the fear and anger with which Rufus abuses Leona.[163] Vivaldo then puts Leona in a cab and prepares to return to Rufus when Leona issues this prophetic warning: '"Rufus ain't going to kill nobody but himself,' she said, 'if he don't find a friend to help him.'"[164]

The suicide of the main character at the end of the first chapter disturbs the flow of the novel, an important jarring from which it spends the remaining three

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[162] Baldwin, Another Country 59.
[163] The rationale Vivaldo later offers when asked if he blames Rufus for what happened to Leona is that Rufus "acted like a bastard" but "we're *all* bastards" (50). Once again (making note of the use of italics for emphasis) Vivaldo uses a colorblind veil to mask his discomfort with his own racial identity. Unfortunately, this serves not only to erase the racial implications of Rufus's relationship with both Leona and Vivaldo, but also shifts the focus of the conversation from black experience to one that needs to be mediated by a white (mis)understanding.
[164] Baldwin, Another Country 60-61.

hundred and fifty pages trying to recover. This early event in the novel has evoked sharp criticisms from all camps. Eldridge Cleaver calls Rufus's suicide an "indulgence in the white man's pastime" and a manifestation of Baldwin's own "racial death wish."[165] Others, seeking a model of queer black survival, have voiced their disapproval. Most commonly, as a reflection of the way in which the issue of suicide is dealt with in real life, critics have chosen to gloss over the implications of Rufus's death and focus on the rest of the novel.

One piece that deals with Rufus's suicide in some depth is "Falling in Public: Larsen's *Passing*, McCarthy's *The Group*, and Baldwin's *Another Country*" by Katy Ryan. In it, she articulates the difficulty in reading and mourning suicide for it "unsettles fundamental assumptions, most emphatically the assumption that life, however painful, is worth living. More precisely than any other act, it illustrates the tensions between freedom and determinism, between being an agent and being a victim."[166] With a keen awareness of this tension she seeks to undue some of the pathologizing that has been done to characters like Rufus by calling suicide a "queer textuality." Rather than seeing the taking of one's life as an "ontological tendency on the part of the melancholic [subject]" Ryan encourages us to read suicide as a manifestation of a social threat in which "anger that would have been directed outward turns inward, shattering a solid sense of self."[167] When read in this way, it is

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[165] Cleaver, Soul on Ice 78.
[166] Katy Ryan, "Falling in Public: Larsen's Passing, Mccarthy's the Group, and Baldwin's Another Country," Studies in the Novel (Univ. of North Texas, Denton) (2004): 95.
[167] Ryan, "Falling in Public: Larsen's Passing, Mccarthy's the Group, and Baldwin's Another Country," 108. It should be pointed out that in using queer to describe Rufus's suicide Ryan is referring to its usage by recent queer theorists as a term that refuses to "accommodate or be accommodated by existing definitional categories." Ryan is not contributing to any causal connection between homophobia and acts of self-destruction that has been claimed by some on the religious right. Rather, she is contending that "suicidal bodies, like queer ones (and to similar extent black bodies), remain a

no surprise that Baldwin chose to, as Susan Feldman says, "deliberately write out the only black male character, the figure of his own self-representation."[168]

Rufus remains the central figure of novel taking on a certain "undeadness" within the relationships between the rest of the characters. Through his suicide, Rufus's body comes to represent the very question that torments those left behind. Within that body too seems to lay the promise of resolution; if only it had not fallen out of reach along with him.

One can see this tension between mystery and revelation contained in Rufus's reoccurring presence throughout the text as it surfaces most remarkably at times where reconciliation seems near at hand. For Vivaldo – who takes on the primary action of the novel in Rufus's stead – the mystery of Rufus's body is linked to Vivaldo's fear of his own body's desires as exemplified in his hesitancy to touch Rufus because he did not want him to think he was queer.[169] The moment that Vivaldo does not reach out to touch Rufus contained the possibility of saving Rufus and thus, torments Vivaldo throughout the rest of the novel.

Rufus is conjured up again during the moment of Vivaldo's "sexual awakening" with Eric. Vivaldo's dreams of Rufus impaling himself on a spiked fence while Ida watches from afar. He is then taken into Rufus's embrace, but wakes to find that it is Eric to whom he is clinging. For Vivaldo, sex with Eric becomes a reenactment of Rufus's fall.

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site of surveillance and the subject of contentious debate about choice, morality, legality, mortality, and reproduction" (Ryan 96). Thus, Rufus' body, as black, queer and self-destructed, serves as a site of indecipherable interpretations and silences for the rest of the characters throughout the novel.

[168] Feldman, "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," 90.

[169] Baldwin, Another Country 342.

> And he wanted to ask Eric, What was it like for Rufus? Then he felt himself falling, as though the weary sea had failed, had wrapped him about and he was plunging down…through a great hole in time, back to his innocence.[170]

It is no wonder many critics have interpreted this moment as revelatory and seen Eric as the sexual Christ figure. The event certainly has the baptismal quality of a ritual cleansing. And Vivaldo does attain the great revelation that he loves Eric and Eric loves him. Yet, with what we already know of the power of love to sustain revelation, one must look further in order to understand the importance of this event to the novel as a whole.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, one of the sharpest and – to a certain extent – justifiable criticisms of Baldwin is his inability to "write women." Part of the issue stems from the fact that compared to his male contemporaries, Baldwin's female characters represent some of the most multi-faceted and fair depictions of women found in this era of fiction. It is for this reason that the disappointment seems all the more acute. Baldwin appears to provide all the ingredients for a feminist text, yet when read representationally he does not go the distance. The underlying resentment in this type of criticism is similar to that which we find among other groups who have, since Baldwin began writing, been vying to claim him as their representative and are then frustrated when he does not "go the distance."

For instance, in relation to the gender dynamics and women of *Another Country*, one cannot help but wonder why same-sex desire is not offered as a viable option for both the men and the women of the novel. Of course, one cannot begin to guess the particular motives behind this omission. Perhaps Baldwin feared he did not

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[170] Baldwin, Another Country 386.

possess the authority to create and depict such an experience within his novels. However, based on the authorial risks he takes otherwise, it is doubtful that Baldwin would have restricted himself based on the logic of authority over experience. It was, one suspects, a confluence of things that prevented Baldwin from venturing into this particularly uncharted literary territory, not the least of which may have had much to do with the historical silencing of female same-sex desire within mainstream society in general. This must be kept in mind so as not to run the risk of anachronistically attributing a lesbian consciousness and language where there very well may not have been one accessible to Baldwin at the time.

With this said, the lack of a representative sexual relationship between females does not have to exclude it from any kind of feminist reading, nor does it indicate a lack of awareness of gendered oppression on the part of Baldwin. It could very well be that in resisting writing overtly feminists themes, Baldwin is consistent with his resistance in aligning his writing with any one cause or singular identity. It is inevitable then, that in attempting to show the interrelatedness of various forms of oppression, Baldwin would fall short of exhausting them. Yet, along the way, as is the case in *Another Country*, he can be seen passing through "feminism" – even if only briefly.

As a character, Cass is far more developed than her husband, Richard, Vivaldo's former English instructor. Throughout the novel, Baldwin provides us with insight into her interior distinguishing her greatly from Leona, the other "representative" white woman of the novel. Baldwin portrays this distinction through Cass's geographic and class differences. In our introduction to Cass through the eyes

of Rufus, we are told she "comes from New England, of plain, old American stock." It is this non-description that makes Cass a mystery to Rufus: "He could never quite place her in the white world to which she seemed to belong."[171] As we later learn and in keeping consistent with the rest of the characters, Cass is also a mystery to herself. It is this self-alienation along with her husband's refusal to see himself in relation to her that leads Cass to have an affair with Eric.

Cass has been sleeping with Eric for some time by the night Vivaldo and Eric do. That same night, Ida and Cass spend the evening together. In a rare moment of what appears to be emotional vulnerability on the part of Ida, she asks Cass to accompany her uptown to meet Ellis, the man with whom we learn later Ida is having an affair. Having just discovered of Cass's affair with Eric, Cass reasons Ida's attitude towards her has changed and that she could now confide in her, even if she were white. For in committing adultery, Cass is taking a step off the pedestal and placing part of her racial privilege in jeopardy.

> Perhaps Ida felt that Cass was more to be trusted and more of a woman, now that her virtue, and her safety, were gone. And there was also…there very faintest hint of blackmail. Ida could be freer with Cass now, since the world's judgment…would condemn Cass yet more cruelly than Ida. For Ida was not white, nor married, nor a mother. The world assumed Ida's sins to be natural, whereas those of Cass were perverse.[172]

In this moment, Baldwin succeeds in capturing one of the many tensions that exists across the category "woman" that does not make allowances for differences such as race. The woman against whom Ida is defined in this passage – "white, married and a mother" – is the woman of the feminist movement that has historically

[171] Baldwin, Another Country 37.
[172] Baldwin, Another Country 345.

excluded women of color and their disparate experiences. It is clear in this passage that Baldwin is cognizant of this tension. Ida indicts Cass for her unreflexive whiteness, yet Cass's suffering as a woman, while worlds apart from Ida's, somehow links them. As Ida says, "You *can* suffer, and you've got some suffering to do, believe me."[173]

It is after this interaction that Cass realizes for the first time the knowledge that black people have of white people, which in turn provides her with a small insight into her own identity as a white woman. This realization forces her to face the reality of both the life she has sought to escape through her affair with Eric as well as its inability to bring about resolution. She returns home that night and begins to undergo the suffering of Ida's prophecy.

In this way, Ida can be seen as functioning similarly for Cass as Eric does for Vivaldo, yet without the orgasm. Ida causes Cass to "fall" from her pedestal just as Eric provides the opportunity for Vivaldo to "fall" away from the restricting performance of heterosexuality that, because of the interdependency between whiteness and compulsory heterosexuality, prevented Vivaldo from reckoning with his racial identity. In retrospectively enacting his desire for Rufus, Vivaldo is able to approach the racial divide that stood between them and that now stands between him and Ida. Just as Cass, in reckoning with (though, importantly, not surmounting) the racial chasm between she and Ida, is able to assess the implications of the gendered and sexually ascribed role she has filled all her life.

Ida too, has fallen and must face the suffering it entails through telling Vivaldo. She begins by talking about Rufus. Ida charges Vivaldo and the rest of

[173] Baldwin, Another Country 351.

Rufus's white friends with having not known anything about him: "I knew more about what happened to my brother than you can ever know. I watched it happen – from the beginning. I was there."[174] At the same time Ida is drawing attention to Vivaldo's inability to conceive of the oppression faced by black people, the limitations of Ida's vision are also elucidated. It is because she is black, not because she was there to witness the events in Rufus's life (including his relationship with Eric) that makes her privy to the knowledge about him that Vivaldo cannot access. Thus, in claiming that the only reason that Rufus is dead is because he was born black, Ida is failing to include variant sexual identities within the "black experience" she claims to have authority over. Additionally, this simplistic logic limits Rufus's own agency in his life and death making their redemption (and by extension the rest of the characters') impossible.

By the close of the conversation, Vivaldo has "at last got what he wanted, the truth out of Ida, or the true Ida; and he did not know how he was going to live with it."[175] Once again, the "moment of truth" is fraught with ambiguity. The reason that Vivaldo does not know what he is going to do with the truth about Ida is because he has not offered her (or himself) the truth about Vivaldo. In not offering Ida the same knowledge about his affair with Eric, Vivaldo is still failing to fully step outside the privileges awarded him by his color and sex. "Enacting love" with Eric will do nothing to improve his relationship with Ida – the one he truly loves – if Vivaldo

[174] Baldwin, Another Country 415.
[175] Baldwin, Another Country 430.

continues to remain in the closet of his whiteness. Their interaction closes with Vivaldo weeping in Ida's arms and Ida "stroking the innocence out of him."[176]

It is clear throughout the novel that Eric is just as defined by Rufus's life and death as the other characters. In fact, he is able to play the redeeming role he does only because of the pain he experiences with Rufus and the way he moves past it. Eric is able to transcend some of this pain and take up this position not because – as Cohen argues – Baldwin posits him as the "universalized gay white savior" hence replacing race with sexuality as the grounds for redemption. Rather, what this type of reading fails to recognize is that Eric's access to partial redemption comes largely as a manifestation of his white, male privilege. He, unlike his black teenage lover LeRoy, could escape the South. After meeting, falling in love and being hurt by Rufus, Eric, unlike Leona could run away to Paris where he could find the distance to reconcile his Southern past with his identity. In turn, he attains knowledge about himself and his relationship to Rufus that places him in a position to offer moments of clarity to Vivaldo and Cass. The acquisition of this liberating knowledge as it is tied up with his white privilege is what renders these moments of revelation suspect and makes Eric an incomplete "Christ-figure." After all he, like the rest of the characters, holds a share of the responsibility for Rufus's death.

According to Katy Ryan, "Suicides lead to places. To dismiss suicidal moments in texts as counterproductive articulations of victim ideology means that we ignore or misread, literal corpses buried in this country."[177] Rufus's suicide rather than being read as a racial scapegoat sacrificed on the path to a homosexual utopia as

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[176] Baldwin, Another Country 431.
[177] Ryan, "Falling in Public: Larsen's Passing, Mccarthy's the Group, and Baldwin's Another Country," 110.

Rowden argues, can be seen to lead the characters of the novel to a more realistic, if incomplete, understanding of their own identities.

As a "queer act," Rufus's suicide and subsequent recurring presence throughout the rest of the novel, disrupts the rigid boundaries demarcating agency and victimhood. Bisexuality functions in a similar fashion through "challeng[ing] the assumption that an individual's identifications are necessarily stable or singular." As Susan Feldman argues, "Bisexuality provides Baldwin with a means of conceptualizing identity that unsettles an objectifying logic in which the self-identity emerges through the appropriation of a distinct other, an identity that only can be maintained by disavowing the difference/other within the self."[178]

We see the way this destructive linear logic of objectifying affects each of the characters of the novel according to their various positions within the dominant social structure. At first glance, the opportunity to escape from these effects seems to be extended more readily to the white characters of the novel lending to charges related to Baldwin's racial politics. Yet, these characters' moments of clarity come when they (ever so temporarily) face the reality of their whiteness. And what, ironically, enables them to have these moments is largely a result of their racial (and for Vivaldo and Eric, their male) privilege. Thus, ambiguity abounds and one wonders if there is, in fact, truth to Cass's suggestion that "maybe we're worse off than you." To which Ida responds, "Oh, you are. There's no maybe about that."[179]

Just as Ida recognizes that Cass stands to lose much more in her infidelity, Baldwin was aware that whites stand to lose much more if the realities of racism are

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[178] Feldman, "Another Look at Another Country: Reconciling Baldwin's Racial and Sexual Politics," 97.
[179] Baldwin, Another Country 352.

exposed. It is for this reason that Vivaldo cannot give Ida the truth that Ida offers him and why we know Yves' arrival in New York at the end of the novel is laden with uncertainty. Moreover, we see how this anxiety prevents many critics from reading Baldwin's fiction in a way that recognizes its radical suggestions.

One such suggestion espoused within *Another Country* is the notion that identity should not be conceived of in terms of an internal essence but rather as the dynamic interplay between a series of contested categories. The intersectionality of identity as it is conceived of by emerging disciplines such as queer theory is a very recent concept within mainstream academic thought. Therefore, although he may not have always been fully successful, Baldwin was engaged in this effort at a time when the very language to communicate such an idea was largely absent. It is then, with pride, but also appropriate hesitancy and awareness of its limitations, that one can begin to see *Another Country* as a decidedly queer text in its "refusal to accommodate or be accommodated by existing definitional categories."[180]

[180] Ryan, "Falling in Public: Larsen's Passing, Mccarthy's the Group, and Baldwin's Another Country," 97.

Conclusion

James Baldwin lived and wrote during a time of rapidly changing political, social and ideological realities; a time when notions of American identity became highly contested territory. His struggle to choose his own definitions for himself and his writing reflects the struggle of many Americans on the margins to become "agents of their own subjectivity."[181]

We forget that this battle continues in our own time and context, only it is being rearticulated in a new language and fought on new terrain. The challenges are different now, but they are born out of a history that continues to have important effects on how we respond to them. This makes revisiting figures like Baldwin, who not only saw justice and truth with a unique "scathing clarity" but carved out a vision for reaching them, so important. Although, in doing so, we must be careful not to resignedly declare that "they don't make 'em like that anymore," and defer to our own paralysis. For what this common American phrase of nostalgia, in only accounting for what "time, circumstance and history" can make of identity, fails to

[181] Robert Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

allow for is the "much more than that" which holds within it the elusive urgency of Baldwin's work.

My generation's tendency to infuse the "sixties" with mythical and unattainable significance belies our own myths of futility in the face of what we deem insurmountable problems. As Reid-Pharr writes and as we witness in relation to much of the recent literary criticism on Baldwin,

> Our knee-jerk disavowals of choice and responsibility ("Not in my name") have come, I suspect, to sound rather shallow when expressed in relation to the radical geopolitical restructurings currently being led by our own nation. Thus, all too often contemporary cultural critics fall prey to the pernicious tendency to project our own generation's fictions of lethargy and powerlessness both backwards and forwards, touching both our ancestors and our progeny.[182]

According to Reid-Pharr, part of what contributes to this "fiction of lethargy and powerlessness" is the assumption that "the less-than-spectacular tools with which we fashion culture and politics are always lacking because they are neither noble nor profound."[183] This has been lived out in Baldwin scholarship. After *Go Tell It on the Mountain* Baldwin was seen as a "novelist in decline" and in relation to his non-fiction his fiction was always seen as "lacking." This contributed to its cathartic characterization as opposed to the social indictment critics read in his essays.

In disallowing those we look to speak for us from being less than spectacular, we obscure the real impact of their work as well as our own. For it is within the everyday role of religion, the tortured thoughts of a troubled white psyche, and the incessant dialogue that takes place in New York City apartments between those who occupy different presumed identities that cultural and political production actually

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[182] Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual 170.
[183] Reid-Pharr, Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual 172.

takes place. Only from this perspective, can the possibilities that lie within Baldwin's novels emerge and inform current discussions of American identity.

What many have simplistically dubbed John Grimes' universal "coming of age" story in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* illustrates the way that notions of loyalty to one's community and history come in conflict with the freedom to choose one's identity. *Giovanni's Room* in performing its own kind of drag shows us the destructive effects of trying to perform and conform to a linear pattern of sex, gender and desire that posits white heterosexuality at the norm. And the characters of *Another Country* experience how deviance does not always disrupt ontology to bring about sustained revelation. In recognizing these "queer" ideas present within these texts we can see their relevance in relation to the challenges of identity faced by the Wesleyan microcosm as well as the discussion surrounding the "conventionality" of Barack Obama's campaign.

Obama's story of mixed racial heritage and his need to "contain the contradictions" of that history resonates with the contradictions embodied in many of Baldwin's characters. Elizabeth's decision to marry Gabriel and raise John in the church for it would buy the time and safety needed to delay John's entrance into a racist world. Ida's love for Vivaldo as it stands in contradiction to her experience of oppression at the hands of white men. All of these characterizations disrupt easy identifications along lines of identity in the same way that Baldwin's writing has evaded easy labels. He knew the risks involved in choosing fiction as a means through which to offer this new framework, he engaged it regardless.

We too, must acknowledge the revolutionary implications that come with "purging ourselves of the conceit" that there exists a profound distinction between the identity categories upon which we have, oppressor and oppressed, grown to rely. More urgently than ever, our tools for making sense of American identity must become more sophisticated and expansive in order to effectively approach the global problems we face.

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