This Country: A James Baldwin Bibliomemoir

by

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I dedicate this project

To Jesus Christ, who saved me
To my mother and sisters, who raised me
To the congregation of Simple Truth Ministries, Inc., who taught me
To Wesleyan University, which challenged me
To my friends, who keep me grounded
To black women everywhere, who inspire me
To New York City, which is home

And to me, who deserves something to be proud of

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And a special thanks to James Baldwin. Thank you for speaking to me, in the 21st century, from your place, decades away.
Introduction

At the intersection of Jerome Avenue, Sedgwick and Ogden on 161st Street in The Bronx, there is a path that leads onto Macombs Dam Bridge and across the Harlem River. Up two hills and down two blocks from the intersection is my apartment building, and if you walk the long block in the other direction you will find the famous Yankee Stadium. I often walked the path across the bridge with my two sisters and mother on Saturdays in the summer while biting on the bright pink flesh of a quenepa. My mother’s ex-boyfriend had taken us along this path for the first time when he lived with us, and I memorized it at around eight or nine years old. There was the endless flow of cars coming from the Major Deegan Expressway, the painted steel beams of the bridge that I always imagined climbing and falling off, the barrier that I’d look through to see the flowing current of the river, the plot of floating forest underneath that I would imagine as a deserted island, and the unrelenting sun that punctuated every journey. Across the bridge was Harlem River Drive, 155th Street and Harlem. We would walk and reach the carwash, then turn the corner and eventually meet the laundromat where my mother would go to get $5 DVDs that were not “bootlegs.” Across the street was the Jimbo’s Hamburgers that served the best French toast I ever had, and around the corner was Holcombe Rucker Park.

This was the Harlem that I first got to know. All the way uptown to 181st street was Washington Heights where my mother worked, downtown to 125th street was Lexington Avenue with the McDonalds and Pathmark, and Lenox Avenue with the Apollo Theater and Popeyes. In my mind however, none of these were a part of the same borough or even adjacent neighborhoods. West 155th Street was Harlem,
but it was an extension of “my” Bronx which was just a bridge away. This is where I ate, met my stepfather’s friends, watched basketball games, and learned the Harlem Shake. My discovery and adoption of W 155th Street happened gradually; I got to know the neighborhood under the supervision of my mother, her then boyfriend, and my two older sisters. Without my mother’s ex-boyfriend to take us there the first time, 155th Street would have remained an unexplored, unknown locale. I borrowed West 155th Street from him, and since he introduced it to me at a time that I desired to find a place for myself, I wanted to call it mine. But as the youngest child in the household, and as the child of an overprotective mother, I could go nowhere without Tysha and Christian, who were two and four years older than me, respectively.

Beyond the one-block radius of our apartment building which included my kindergarten school, the corner store, the “chicken spot,” and my elementary school, I could go nowhere alone. And so we shared Harlem. All of my memories of the place are with them. My Harlem was simultaneously theirs.

This is the Harlem that came to mind when I first became a reader of James Baldwin. I devoured “Sonny’s Blues” while a junior in college, and while I read the story I could see myself walking down the streets Baldwin evoked. I knew the neighborhood shared by Sonny and his older brother, at least in passing. I could even imagine those unnamed blocks “alongside the park,” on “the west side” that the taxi man drove along—where the people, as Baldwin noted, somehow remained the same—from some reservoir of experience (Going to Meet 112). I could imagine a day and time when I had walked down Seventh Avenue without realizing it, speedily
passed by the ghost of the nightclub Sonny played in and entered the same train station that Sonny’s brother had emerged from to get to work.

Not only could I recognize Baldwin’s Harlem, but I was familiar with the struggles of his characters—the feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and familial love and resentment that haunted them. I was personally familiar with the difficulty of finding one’s own way out of this world, as Baldwin depicted it—of choosing what one would acknowledge, of putting all the stifling and harsh and terrifying truths of one’s situation “outside” oneself; of denying the truth of the neighborhood that one lived in, sinking into the safety of one’s own determination to not do what others often did, to not end up where others did (103). And because my personal experience of these things was inextricably tied to my life in The Bronx, I became fascinated by James Baldwin’s ability to weave place, race, and personhood together. I wanted to know, and read, more.

Born August 2, 1924 in Harlem, New York, James “Jimmy” Baldwin grew up during a tumultuous time in American history. His upbringing was defined by the corned beef his mother fed him every day during the harsh Depression, the brothers and sisters he had to care for as the oldest child, the religiously devout and emotionally troubled stepfather with whom he had to contend, and the racial oppression he saw daily. Despite the poverty and hardship of his young life, Baldwin matured into a thoughtful and talented writer who used his medium to reflect on the life he and many others around him had to lead, as well as on the nation that had largely rejected him and his kind. Harlem was not merely the place of his birth—it was the place to which he had troubled ties. It was in that neighborhood that Baldwin
faced many of the conditions that he would write about in his fiction and nonfiction later.

New York City is the first thing that I noticed I shared with Baldwin. The place of my birth has defined, both consciously and unconsciously, the way I see my identity as a black woman. The city of New York provides a backdrop for all of the works I discuss in this project, which aims to create a dialogue between Baldwin’s life and my own.

Baldwin was recognized as an important writer during his day, and there has been a recent renewal of interest in his work. Today, his claims about the nature of American racism, as well as his visions of the solutions to this ever-present problem appear newly relevant. Today, we continue to answer the questions Baldwin posed during his writing career: will white America will ever relinquish their reliance on racism, will black Americans ever be able to live without the constant threat of violence and consequences of discrimination, and will anyone in such a broken society be able to lead a fulfilled and meaningful life. In order to center myself in these discussions, I want to examine Baldwin’s works and writing. Baldwin’s thoughts about racism, freedom and love came directly from his experiences. In “My Dungeon Shook,” Baldwin urged his nephew to trust his experience above all (Vintage 7). In fact, throughout his writing, Baldwin always understood the meaning of American injustice through personal experience and personal identity. One could not discover a meaningful identity without contending with the national reality of racial oppression, he contended. Nor could one understand structural injustice without realizing how it shaped one’s self. Today, when the deep problems Baldwin
emphasized return in both new and familiar guises—when our national discourse is defined by gun violence, sexual violence, redlining, mass incarceration, and a host of other injustices—Baldwin’s challenge remains crucial. Understanding one’s self in the midst of a larger political imaginary and global struggle is a project of great importance, one I aim to take up through this project.

This project is a combination of literary and critical analysis of James Baldwin’s fictional works with my own reflections on growing up in New York City as a black woman. The affinities between Baldwin’s life and my own, which directly made his work appeal to me, led me to desire a dialogue between us. This dialogue is meant to determine to what extent his ideas are relevant today by seeing them in relation to my contemporary context. But it is also intended to lead me to a better understanding of my own identity. Drawing on Baldwin’s biographies in order to situate his life in a particular political climate, as well as his own essays to understand him as a critic of his time period, I look to bring together the worlds of Baldwin’s novels and short stories during the 20th century and my 21st century experience. By closely examining the themes, characterizations and commentaries imbued in the stories he presented to readers during his career, I look to draw a connection between the concerns of his time and the preoccupations of mine. Historical context and existing critical analyses of Baldwin’s writing will ground this project in past and present scholarship, but I look to enlarge the already expansive scholarship on Baldwin by drawing close relationships between the writer, his writings, and myself.

In the first chapter of this project, I examine Baldwin’s representation of Christianity and the African American church of the 20th century, particularly in his
first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. There, using my personal experiences in the church, I evaluate the validity of Baldwin’s initial opinions of the church against those he developed later, and assess whether or not the church fulfills its purpose in the lives of African American congregants. In the second chapter, I weave together the voices of three young black female characters in Baldwin’s fiction with those of myself and my mother. There, I chart the representation of young black women in Baldwin’s fiction over the course of his career, most notably through their relationships with men, and make connections between their personal identities and romances to contemporary discussions of race and love. In the final chapter, I reflect on the environment of Wesleyan University and the ideas of post-racialism, liberalism and white allyship that fell through during the 2016 election. There, I examine how the “Negro problem” as it was called in Baldwin’s time can be addressed by people of color and white people in a society that rejects the very racial progress it claims to have made.

Unconventional as my method of analysis may be, I am not without predecessors. Recently, a number of writers have explored the new critical genre of the “bibliomemoir,” in which a writer describes his or her experiences of engaging deeply with a particular writer, such as Geoff Dyer in *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence*, Nicholson Baker in *U and I: A True Story*, and Rebecca Mead in *My Life in Middlemarch*. Each of these writers uses their fondness and appreciation for a particular book or author as a means of self-exploration and discovery. I look to do the same in this project.
But not only are these bibliomemoir writers my predecessors, Baldwin himself provides a model for the form of my project. At every point in which Baldwin wrote critically, whether it was about the slums of Harlem, the experience of race felt by black people, or relations between African Americans and the Jewish community, his autobiography was present. Those experiences that defined the lens through which he looked at the world were constantly and deliberately made a part of his writing. It is my plan to pursue the same consideration of my life in relation to the canon of James Baldwin.
Chapter One

*Go and Sin No More: Sin and Redemption in James Baldwin’s Go Tell It on the Mountain and the 21st Century Church*

Baldwin said that *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was the novel that he had to write if he was going to write anything else.\(^1\) It was his first novel, and the years he spent working on it resulted in a deeply complex and emotionally rich plot and array of characters. I begin to trace the continued significance of Baldwin’s ideas with *Go Tell It* for a number of reasons. Beyond the fact that it was his first published novel and therefore began his reputation as a novelist, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is, much like this project, an intentionally autobiographical and self-reflexive work. The book chronicles the events of John Grimes’s 14th birthday, on which he comes of age amidst family struggles, religious questions and personal strife. However, it is not only the story of John. To any reader familiar with his creator’s personal life, it is obvious that the young boy represents James Baldwin, who himself had once been a young man in Harlem attempting to come into black male adulthood under the shadow of the Christian religion and an overbearing stepfather. Gabriel Grimes, in turn, is David Baldwin, the stand-in father of James, who elicited strong and complicated feelings in his stepson. *Go Tell It*, then, was Baldwin’s attempt to make sense of his story, that of his family, and the influence church had on his life. It was also a meditation on the black church as an institution and an evaluation of religion’s influence on the wider black community of the 20th century. Intertwining its issues

\(^1\) Baldwin made this comment in 1985 in reaction to his first novel being turned into a movie. He further reflects on his writing career in the article, “James Baldwin Reflects on ‘Go Tell It’ PBS Film,” which was published by The New York Times on January 10, 1985.
with its possibilities, Baldwin creates a conclusion about Christianity that is as hopeful as it is uncertain.

Baldwin’s novel exposes how blackness, community, power and sin are intrinsically connected in the African American church. These were things he observed while a part of the Holiness tradition in his youth, but could not articulate until his adulthood. Baldwin depicts the black church as a sanctuary in both senses of the word—a holy place, and a place of refuge for those in danger. The church is an institution with both religious and communal significance, having benefits for a people with little freedom and nowhere else to go. This would be one of Baldwin’s main arguments in the novel, that to black people in the 20th century, the church was a means to commune with God, commune with fellow believers, and, perhaps most importantly, ensure one’s safety from the spiritual and physical dangers of a racist or “carnal” world on the outside. However, in Go Tell It and his later works, including his first play The Amen Corner, Baldwin would draw a subtle, varied and complex picture of the church, including its beauty as well as what he saw as its deep-seated issues. Both the benefits and drawbacks Christianity held for those it sought to save played a large role in how he considered African American identity, and both are given attention in his first novel.

In the years before he finished Go Tell It, young James Baldwin tenaciously attempted to create the space he needed to become an artist. He’d grown tired of Harlem and longed to get away from the neighborhood, a move he saw as necessary.

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2 The information included about Baldwin’s life is drawn from a number of sources, including David Leeming’s expansive biography James Baldwin: A Biography and Herb Boyd’s Baldwin’s Harlem. For a short synopsis of Baldwin’s life, see Randall Kenan’s “James Baldwin, 1924-1987: A Brief Biography” in A Historical Guide to James Baldwin edited by Douglas Field.
in order to fulfill his calling as a writer. He felt trapped by responsibilities to his family that he was sure were stifling his artistic expression. David Baldwin, his father and model for the character of Gabriel Grimes, was dying, spiraling further into madness, and his mother was pregnant, which James found deeply agitating. David Baldwin died on July 29, 1943, on the same day that his final child Paula was born. His funeral was held August 2nd, on the nineteenth birthday of his stepson. James attended the funeral, slightly drunk, and desperately tried to celebrate his birthday with a friend downtown afterwards. As Baldwin later recalled in his celebrated essay “Notes of a Native Son,” black people in Harlem lay waste to the white businesses in the area on the same night, protesting what they had heard was the death of a black soldier at the hands a white police officer. Baldwin felt distanced from all of these simultaneously occurring events and further isolated from the neighborhood of his birth. After the death of his stepfather, Baldwin would wander the city, spending time in libraries, parks, and the Apollo, feeling torn between his responsibility to his family and his writing.

He needed to leave, and he finally would, for Greenwich Village. There he began his career as an essayist, publishing several pieces in New York’s leftist magazines, and living in the lower west part of Manhattan. The period of time he spent in the Village was marked by nights having passionate arguments with artist friends, having temporary sexual relationships with men and women, and writing the novel that was first called “Crying Holy” and finally was titled *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. He did not make serious progress on the novel, though, until he fled to Paris in 1948. Living in New York City, he later said, did not allow him the space he
needed to come to terms with his racial and sexual identity. He had to leave the
United States to see himself as he was at fourteen, and to see his city and country for
what it really had been. Though his first novel was entrenched in the realities of race,
religion, and sexuality in the distinct context of the twentieth-century American South
and North, *Go Tell It on The Mountain* was written largely in Paris and finished in a
small Swiss village.

In an effort to understand the opinions that motivated him to write works
concerned with Christianity, critics have often looked at the essays that make up
Baldwin’s book *The Fire Next Time*, in which he exposes his views about the church
and Christianity directly. Before reading the essays, critics were unsure if *Go Tell It
on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner* were intended to depict the church as
ultimately hopeful. However, by the time *The Fire Next Time* was published in 1963,
Baldwin had changed, as did his nation. His views had become more forceful in light
of the Civil Rights Movement, and his method of expressing them had become more
urgent. His views on the Christian church, therefore, became more forceful as well.
The essay itself was born out of his reckoning with the Nation of Islam, which, itself
a revivalist religious movement that spoke to black Americans’ desire for racial
community and honor, had developed a mass following under the leadership of Elijah
Muhammed and especially Malcolm X. Baldwin had already been searching for ways
to articulate spirituality and “holiness” outside the confines of Christianity, and so his
encounter with the Nation of Islam unsurprisingly affected him. His meeting with
Elijah Muhammed and his followers led him to a youthful experience of spiritual

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3 Clarence E. Hardy III writes extensively on Baldwin’s religious background and how it affected his
writing career in his book *James Baldwin’s God*, and briefly in “James Baldwin as Religious Writer:
The Burdens and Gifts of Black Evangelism” contained in *A Historical Guide to James Baldwin*. 
“astonishment” that he had drawn on when writing *Go Tell It on the Mountain* years before.

In “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” the main essay of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin recalls his unlikely experience at Mother Horn’s church during the summer of his fourteenth birthday, when his fears and anxieties about sex and sin came to a head. One moment, he stood in the pews clapping his hands, and in the next, he found himself flat on his back on the church floor. His feelings of his own deep depravity, as well as his fears about the city in which he lived—what he described as the “evil within . . . and . . . the evil without”—made him search for an answer that he later looked back on as a “gimmick” (*Price of the Ticket* 337). He found that gimmick—something that could take his attention and give him a sense of safety to “start him on his way”—in Mother Horn’s church, where he became a teen preacher (341).

Baldwin’s next three years were defined by a continuous battle with the competing forces of sin and desire, a battle that he had assumed was over when he rose from the church floor that Sunday and was told that he was “saved” (344). The boy preacher would continue to have dreams of the flesh and continue to hate his father David Baldwin, who verbally and physically abused him. He began to see that he was just as depraved as he had felt before joining the ministry, and so were the members of his congregation. The people did not practice the commandments they emphasized to “unbelievers,” and their mock “holiness” did nothing to change their conditions.

Though fear of what lay outside the church doors leads Baldwin’s characters to God and led him personally to the ministry in his youth, he eventually came to
believe that Christianity could only provide a temporary reprieve from the dangers of American life faced by black bodies. He knew that the realities of racial tensions still penetrated the world of churchgoers, and that these things would not go away merely with prayer. Though Baldwin’s congregation believed that Judgment Day was always nearby, he rejected that as a reason for inaction. He believed it would be better if his congregation “[threw] away their Bibles and [got] off their knees and [went] home” instead of waiting for God to save them (348). Personal salvation, he wrote, as well as the nation’s salvation, needed to come from the citizens themselves treating one another with an active and serious love.

The bottom line for Baldwin was that being in the church had done nothing to release him from the sexual anxieties that had drawn him to it, and the “sanctuary” of the church neither protected its people nor was any different from the world outside. In fact, Baldwin felt with complete conviction that God was white, and in the same way that white people wanted black people to live up to unattainable standards, the pursuit of holiness in Christianity meant becoming white. And this was impossible. This God was not a God in whom Baldwin could believe. If He wanted His children—whom He said He loved—to deny every innate human desire they had and work towards the impossible goal of being sinless while being constantly killed by the state, God was not a God of love. If His children used the cause of righteousness to judge and berate others, and hid behind their salvation to absolve themselves of these wrong actions, God was not a just God. If His children covertly hated white people so much that they relished the thought of judgment coming upon them swiftly and without mercy, God wasn’t real. Or at least, this God was not.
Though Baldwin would leave the pulpit at seventeen to preach a different gospel, one that emphasized love and embraced sexuality, he would remain concerned with basic human desires and the “gimmicks” that black people ran to in order to deal with their own sense of depravity in a political state that marked them as inherently evil. At the tender age of fourteen, the same age as *Go Tell It’s* protagonist, James Baldwin knew that he needed to escape the streets. Though the church would prove to only be a temporary sanctuary, the Pentecostal Holiness church had made a lasting impression on him. And in his future thoughts about the “race problem,” national identity and the influence of history on contemporary life, the question and possibility of redemption would powerfully emerge, as it had done in the Bible James read for his sermons, the teachings of Mother Horn, and the members of Baldwin’s congregation who held fast to this hope as they cried holy.

The distinct picture of the church that Baldwin creates in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, what Barbara K. Olson terms the “church idiom,” was what stood out to me when reading. The depiction of the church members seemed neither false nor exaggerated based on my personal experiences. I’d been a member of my church for almost ten years—I’d seen the Holy Spirit move in the sanctuary; I’d been moved on before. The threshing-floor was ground I’d walked, looking to be healed, to be “made whole,” to be saved. With memories of Sundays, Fridays and some Tuesdays in my

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4 To understand the “church idiom” Baldwin creates in his fiction, read Barbara K. Olson’s “‘Come-to-Jesus Stuff’ in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*.” For further critical responses to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, see Soyica Colbert’s “Go Tell It on the Mountain: Baldwin’s Sermonic” and Michael F. Lynch’s “Staying Out of the Temple.” For readers interested in short essays about *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, read *New Essays on Go Tell It on the Mountain* edited by Trudier Harris.
mind, I read *Go Tell It* and immediately identified with the saints of The Temple of the Fire Baptized. And so all the “come-to-Jesus stuff” that one of the editors of the novel wanted taken out of the novel was not just stuff, but doctrine and practice that was accurately represented (*Amen Corner* xiv). If it had been my book and someone told me to take it all out, I probably would have gagged too.

I was eleven when my mother first took me and my sisters to Simple Truth Ministries Inc. on White Plains Road in The Bronx. My older sisters Tysha and Christian were fourteen and sixteen, respectively. None of us were thrilled. The sanctuary was small and the basement was still under construction. I’d never been to the neighborhood before—it was an hour from our home and we didn’t have a car. I was not looking forward to waking up at 8am in order to be on time to read an unknown book with people I didn’t know. I was not completely unfamiliar with church, however. My maternal grandfather was the Deacon of a Baptist church in Queens. We would spend occasional weekends at his house, and on Sundays we always spent the day in service. On Saturdays, like John before the prayer service in *Go Tell It*, my grandfather had to clean the sanctuary. For a young girl getting away from her apartment for the weekend, exploring the expansive two floor church he had us help clean was enough adventure for a Saturday afternoon. On Sundays after Sunday School and before service, my sisters and I would go to the corner store across the street. We would gather our snacks before running back across the street, settling down on the plush pews of the sanctuary and going to sleep. Christian always stayed awake and listened, but Tysha and I laid our heads on her legs and napped while the people prayed and praised. It wouldn’t be until I found myself in Simple
Truth at age eleven, “too old” to sleep through the entire service and too polite to let my attention wander under the gaze of the Pastor—who could see everything from his place at the front of the church—that I listened to the Message.

Not only did Baldwin’s church idiom seem authentic to me, but the critiques of the church he made in *Fire* and the novel were worthy of attention. Issues such as a lack of love amongst the people, judgment of the saints and hypocrisy that the characters of *Go Tell It* exemplify and bring up reminded me of my upbringing in the church, and the sometimes confusing feelings I had about my faith. Many of the problems Baldwin identifies are things I’d considered or had dialogues about with my mother, sisters and even my Bishop and Pastor. Despite the complicated issues it brought up, however, I saw *Go Tell It* as a picture of hope for the church. The issues Baldwin reckons with in his novel were not miniscule, but neither were they ultimately irreparable. I had faced difficulty in being a “church girl,” but the church I was a part of had supplied me with a positive community environment that was instrumental to my development. Today, I cannot imagine a life without my church home and family.

As John stands on “the crest of the hill, hands clasped beneath his chin, looking down” at Broadway from Central Park on his 14th birthday, he thinks about the possibility of inhabiting, conquering and possessing the “shining city which his ancestors had seen with longing from far away,” and being engulfed by “wonders his eyes had never seen.” But after a moment of reflection, he remembers “the people he had seen in that city, whose eyes held no love for him” and “how he was a stranger there.” Suddenly the temptations threatening to consume him are stifled by images of
“his father and his mother, and all the arms stretched out to hold him back,” that warned him against the city, against the streets, “where, they said, his soul would find perdition” (Go Tell It 34-35). In his youth John believes in the pervasive idea that the Northern city is a land of opportunity for all. However, he is reminded by the adults in his life and his daily experiences that his race permanently excludes him from this opportunity. The white population, who held ownership over the city, “did not see him, or, if they saw him, they smirked,” making obvious their power and his poverty (35). According to John’s father, “white people were never to be trusted… they told nothing but lies, and… not one of them had ever loved a nigger.” And since John himself “was a nigger,” the world he wanted “was not for him” (38-39). He and his people were confined to “the back door” and “the dark stairs” (39). It is church folk that are determined to pull John back from this lust for “Broadway, where motor cars and buses and the hurrying people” seem to “roar” their damnation. The street is not merely a mode of transportation according to the church members, but it is a direct reference to Biblical symbols of eternal condemnation and spiritual death. The literal street of “Broadway” refers to “the way that led to death,” which “was broad,” with “many . . . found thereon.” On Broadway, “the marks of Satan could be found in the faces of the people who waited at the doors of movie houses,” and sin “cried in the lights” (35). Both racial subjugation and spiritual damnation await John in the city, while the church promises protection and eternal life.

The Temple of the Fire Baptized, John’s family’s church, stands “on the corner of [a] sinful avenue, facing the hospital to which criminal wounded and dying were carried almost every night” and marks the threshold between sin and holiness.
By placing the “sinful avenue” and the hospital together, Baldwin marks an important connection between the ideas of sin and physical death in the eyes of the black church members of The Temple. Not only is the church a stronghold against wrongdoing and temptation, it is meant to be a defense against the possibility of death that is a consequence of being black. Though The Temple had begun as “an abandoned store,” the people, “ready to do the Lord’s work,” grew in numbers and “created a church” that would serve these dual purposes. Determined to reach those dying spiritually and preserve those at risk of dying physically as well, “the Temple… had raised up evangelists and teachers and prophets… to go up and down the land carrying the gospel or to raise other temples—in Philadelphia, Georgia, Boston, or Brooklyn. Wherever the Lord led, they followed” (57-58).

Against these depictions of the church home and direct references to the danger of the world outside, however, Baldwin places troubling images of the failures and cruelties of the church. By showing the unloving attitudes of preachers, the guilt of sinning saints, and the sexual frustration of nearly every member of the church, Baldwin depicts the Holiness church as contributing its own dangers to those it seeks to protect. The requirement of “holiness” has the ability to stifle individuality in some and breed tyranny in others. For John, enacting holiness only means accepting poverty, the same poverty that he, his mother, father, and siblings are subject to. Though he knows that following the Broadway will lead to moral corruption and eternal punishment, he cannot bring himself to desire the “narrow way, the way of the cross,” because it meant “humiliation forever” and “a house like his father’s house, and a church like his father’s, and a job like his father’s where he would grow old and
black with hunger and toil.” If he accepts the sacrifice of Christ, he will continue the life his father leads, one that leads nowhere near prosperity but had instead “given [John] a belly filled with wind and had bent his mother’s back” (35).

At the same time, while claiming to shield the congregation from the dangers of racial subjugation and anti-black violence, the church gives so-called “believers” access to power that they are denied on the outside. This power fuels their already existing rage at the power structures that keep them bound, and allows them to enact that anger, which they cannot direct on the actual objects that incite them, on their “brothers and sisters” in the faith. The power that Gabriel Grimes gains from being a “holy handyman” whose life everyone in the church assumed was “spotless” allows him to direct the frustration he has from years of powerlessness on his family and call it “[setting his] house in order” (59, 33). He rules his home with violence, which he inflicts on Elizabeth, John’s mother; Roy, John’s brother; and John himself. After Roy returns home from a fight with white boys that leaves him with a wound in his forehead, Gabriel slaps his wife for “allowing” the incident to occur and viciously whips Roy for cursing him when he sees his mother being beaten. The image of Gabriel rising to strike his son is imbued with religious fervor. In “the absolute silence that followed Roy’s words, John saw that his father was not seeing him, was not seeing anything unless it were a vision.” His father becomes “some evil beast, crouching and ravenous, with eyes like Hell unclosed,” and John is stricken with fear (55). Gabriel beats his son mercilessly. “The belt was raised again, and again. The air rang with the whistling, and the crack! against Roy’s flesh.” Gabriel prays all the
while, whispering “My Lord, my Lord” as he punishes Roy, using God’s name to justify his anger (56).

The end of the book is defined by John’s powerful conversion, which is a metaphysical, visceral and imaginative depiction of the “church idiom.” It is importantly preceded by time John spends considering the realities of black life wandering the city streets, the terrible violence Elizabeth and Roy suffer at the hands of Gabriel, and the retelling of John’s family members’ histories. The amalgamation of issues that Baldwin sets forth in the narrative—the question of John’s soul, the structures of power existing in American society, the power structures existing in John’s home, the close-knit and sometimes stifling community of the church, and John’s stepping into manhood on the day of his birthday—mount until they are faced all at once by John on the threshing floor. Standing on the hill in Central Park in the beginning, John struggles with the possibilities offered by the city, and attempts to reconcile them with not only the reality brought on by his color and his church upbringing, but his family’s relentless poverty and the rule of his father. Though he cannot lay hold to the glories of the city, holiness has offered his family no change to their condition and has made his father a justified monster. After his father’s outburst of rage and violence against his mother and brother, John seethes with hatred, a hatred that seems to directly scorn God. For it was “this man, God’s minister” that “had struck John’s mother, and John had wanted to kill him—and wanted to kill him still” (59). At the end of the novel, however, John is suddenly struck “astonished under the power of the Lord” and is forever changed (247). This change only happens after the “prayers” of his Aunt Florence, his father and his mother go before him, and
after he embarks on a terrifying vision and dream journey. In each story of migration to the North that make up these prayers, Florence, Gabriel and Elizabeth contend with their racial and spiritual realities—two conditions that seem to be inextricably linked. Their stories come together to form a context for not only their lives but the life of John. And finally, on the threshing-floor, John is made to face his family’s demons, the history of his people, and the condition of his soul at once, and emerges a lover of the Lord. However, the strength of the issues evoked in the prayers and beforehand makes his getting up as a believer not only complicated but uncertain.

In Florence’s prayer, she is finally humbled and brought, after “sixty groaning years... to her mother’s starting-place, the altar of the Lord” (76). Looking back on her mother and her life in the South, she remembers her pride, and the “hatred and bitterness” towards her brother that kept her from praying to God for forgiveness (77). Throughout her life, she had attempted to distance herself not only from her family, but from blackness itself and what she saw as “common nigger” behavior (100). This, she thought, would ensure that she retained some self-worth after leaving home, where she was invisible to her mother and had rejected the limited possibilities open to her as a black woman. Gabriel’s prayer brings him back to his sinful past, in which he was powerless due to his color and therefore asserted his dominance in the many “[beds] of sin” he found on the streets, chasing after the “pride of conquest” that he could not get anywhere else. Walking home one day, “with the violence of water that has burst the dams and covered the banks,” he has a vision from the Lord and trades his desire for power fulfilled through sin for a desire of power that could be fulfilled through a holy heir (116). His obsession with receiving honor causes him
to attempt to raise his first wife Deborah from the trenches of her bad reputation, and later attempt to raise Elizabeth from the trenches of fornication and mothering an illegitimate child. His past of seeking power through fornication merely becomes a use of women to gain reverence through marriage and childbearing. Elizabeth’s prayer is in remembrance of John’s father, Richard, who killed himself after being wrongly accused of theft and thrown in jail. The accusation comes as a direct result of his blackness. According to the store owner, “black bastards” are “all the same” and Richard is therefore a criminal though he committed no crime (222). After Richard’s death, it is Gabriel and the promise of holiness in marriage that brings Elizabeth “for the first time since the death of Richard… hope… that she was not altogether cast down, that God might raise her again in honor” (241).

Baldwin traces a direct connection between his characters’ constant anxieties about sin and damnation to their experiences of alienation and confusion surrounding racism and northern migration. John’s parents and aunt were raised in the Jim Crow South, an experience which colored their ideas about race and oppression. Upon moving to Harlem, they encountered similar and unfamiliar forms of racial violence. In the context of continued oppression and poverty, they were thrust into a new urban environment in which vice and crime flourished, and where their children threatened to escape their control. The city as they see it is a place of excess, sexual freedom and violence. Gabriel remarks that New York is “mighty big” and that “the Devil’s working every day” (240). Against this volatile racial background is placed the hope of Christian salvation. John’s family looks to a Savior who promises to protect them on every side, erecting a barrier around their corporeal bodies that are constantly
under siege by white supremacy, and their souls, constantly under siege by the
temptations of sin that are characteristic of the wanton Northern city. The church
provides a place of sanctity from a problem that is not only unavoidable for human
bodies with their desires, but the black body specifically coded for death.

After these prayers, which tell the distinct yet similar histories of John’s
family members, he experiences his conversion. In his vision, he encounters his
family members, all “far above him, waiting, watching his torment in the pit” as he
reckons with their experiences and the course of history that defines the experiences
of African Americans (254). In the darkness of the grave, John encounters “his
mother and his father, his mother dressed in scarlet, his father dressed in white,” his
“Aunt Florence, gold and silver flashing on her fingers,” and his brother, “brown and
silent” laying on the ground. He even meets “the wife of his father’s called Deborah,”
who “signified that there was no speech in the grave” (260). His sojourn through the
grave is ominous, filled with visions of his father, voices that prompt him to “go
through,” and sounds that connect John directly to the past (263). The “darkness
began to murmur” and John recognizes this sound as having “filled [his] life . . . from
the moment he had first drawn breath” (261). This noise could be found everywhere
John had been, and reverberated from his lifetime to lifetimes he had not seen:

He had heard it everywhere, in prayer and in daily speech, and wherever the
saints were gathered, and in the unbelieving streets. It was in his father's
anger, and in his mother’s calm insistence, and in the vehement mockery of
his aunt; it had rung, so oddly, in Roy’s voice this afternoon, and when Elisha
played the piano it was there; it was in the beat and jangle of Sister
McCandless’s tambourine, it was in the very cadence of her testimony… And now in his moaning, and so far from any help, he heard it in himself—it rose from his bleeding, his cracked-open heart. It was a sound of rage and weeping from time set free, but bound now in eternity; rage that had no language, weeping with no voice—which yet spoke now, to John’s startled soul, of boundless melancholy, of the bitterest patience, and the longest night; of the deepest water, the strongest chains, the most cruel lash; of humility most wretched, the dungeon most absolute, of love’s bed defiled, and birth dishonored, and most blood, unspeakable, sudden death. Yes, the darkness hummed with murder: the body in the water, the body in the fire, the body on the tree. (261-262)

As John faces this “dark army,” the “despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon, the earth’s offscouring,” and fears that their “dread testimony would be his,” he calls out to the Lord for salvation and only then is he able to finally “go through” and reach the end of his vision, where he can “rise up… and talk about the Lord’s deliverance” as Elisha prompts him to do (263, 268). For John, coming to salvation is not merely a personal decision, but it means acknowledging the struggles and deaths of so many of his people, which are inseparable from his own life and experiences. Here, Baldwin makes obvious the idea that salvation in the black church is inseparable from the realities of anti-blackness in American society.

Throughout the novel, Baldwin weaves together possibility with uncertainty as it pertains to safety, holiness and salvation. The members of The Temple, though they look to church as a haven, are not immune from anti-black racism and often
harm their brothers and sisters. And even John’s salvation is not on entirely sure ground. Baldwin leaves readers wondering what the future holds the novel’s protagonist—will he be able to stay on the path he leaves the tarry service so eager for? Will the peace he attempted to make with his father eventually return to cold hatred? Any answer to these questions seems probable. The world around him has undergone no change though he has. “The houses were there, as they had been,” and still the people, “sleeping now, invisible, private,” would wake in the morning and resume life as they had before John’s salvation (283). He knew that “he would weep again… he would rage again… he would be in darkness again, in fire again,” though now he had “a joy unspeakable” to keep him strong (284). And his father remained, “behind him,” refusing to smile even as John smiled in the joy of the Lord (291). Despite the uncertainty Baldwin plants in his readers, the hope he places in John’s final words should not be dismissed. Though he couldn’t know where life would lead him, he knew that he was “ready,” he was “coming,” and he was “on [his] way” (291). At least The Temple had given him that.

When at eleven years old, close to young John Grimes’s age, I was made to understand sin and the wages thereof, my overwhelming feeling was fear. On a Sunday during the morning message, however, I was given the solution. My Bishop asked us to imagine standing in a hallway. We were on a line, with people in front and behind us. There was another line beside ours. At the front of our line, something was happening: people were screaming, crying, and begging for mercy. They were being thrown into eternal torment. We were next. And this image frightened me, as I
suppose it was intended to do. The question was whether or not I would accept the Lord today—while I still had time, before I died, despite all the things I thought I did “right” in the world and all the family I loved and the friends I made. I would be judged according to my sins, for which I needed to pay since I had not accepted Jesus who was sent to pay the price on my behalf. He loved me, and that’s why he was giving me this opportunity to be His child. Would I accept him now? I answered yes at the altar that day. I stepped off the path of destruction and onto the way of salvation.

Many of the issues Baldwin brings up in his novel are addressed in my church and my life. In Simple Truth Ministries, bringing up racial realities is not taboo. The hymns we sing are often related to “old Negro spirituals,” and my Bishop, the color of coffee, sometimes evokes images of the Underground Railroad and the horrors of slavery in his sermons. Like the members of The Temple of the Fire Baptized, we place the hope of salvation over the existence of anti-black racism. To be scorned by the world is only a temporary condition—the Lord will never reject us. When we die, we will be united with Him and the troubles of this world will be over. Until then, we must endure, pray, and sometimes suffer, but always know that we will never be forsaken. If we continue to work on our salvation, keep a humble heart, and gather together with our fellow saints in church, we will be saved and therefore safe. We must know that this world is not our home, and therefore understand that the suffering that the world brings to us will eventually end, and be rewarded with joy everlasting. The black body, in the eyes of the Lord, is just as valuable as any other. Race is in the eyes of men, but the Lord sees the heart.
At the same time, my church family also understands our sanctuary as a “hiding place” from the physical and spiritual dangers on the outside. When I started applying to colleges in other cities and states, my Pastor and the other members did much to warn me against the temptations that would be heightened when I wasn’t with them. To be away from the church was to be vulnerable to spiritual danger, even if the person leaving was saved. In the sanctuary we find safety, but we also gain the power needed to face the streets to which we must eventually return. The songs, prayers, sermons, communion and community are suppliers of holy energy, which helps to keep believers on the path of righteousness. My leaving home was not merely a matter of missing my family, it was a matter of stepping into hazardous territory. The sinful would be many, I was warned, and I would need to bear up under their influence. Whenever I return home from school, my Bishop mentions me over the pulpit, thanking God for protecting me when I was away. My congregation’s thoughts surrounding my going away to college closely resembled the way Baldwin’s characters saw the church—being outside of the church was opening one’s self to the ever-present possibility of spiritual and physical death. Stepping across the threshold that separated the church from the street was dangerous, and any spiritual person needed to be hyper-vigilant, and ultimately come home where they could be safe.

Like John, my receiving salvation came with its promises and uncertainties, but nevertheless brought me hope. I was taught in church that life as one of God’s children would cause me to be scorned, misunderstood, and deemed “weird.” However, it was for the gift of eternal life that I would set myself apart willingly and be holy before Him. I already did not engage in the same behaviors as my classmates
and neighbors—I didn’t curse, I didn’t think to do drugs and I never disrespected my teachers—but as a believer, I took on a new dedication to good behavior. I examined my actions with vigilance and made sure that I did not violate the commands of the Lord or fall into temptation. This mandate didn’t become difficult until I left middle school. As it did for Baldwin, the confusion of Christianity and sin became evident to me when I embarked on my teenage years. As I became older, the lines between what was permissible and wrong became blurred. And as those lines became blurred, a desire in me to do things that walked that line gradually grew.

Most things were clearly talked about in my church—even though the adult members were mostly older black people who held conservative ideas—but the concept of sexuality was left uncertain. Abstinence was something that was expected, and something that I did not speak out against. Sex became something that I didn’t talk about and tried my best not to think about as I got older. The silence of my church’s members on the subject of the flesh, which we were to deny daily, and its desires for human connection and intimacy, kept me in a cycle of shame, confusion and resignation. I hated the feelings I had, repented fervently for the desires I felt, and questioned how “pure” I truly was. On a Sunday I would sob and apologize, and determine not to allow myself to be caught up in temptation again. But, although not often, the feelings, the thoughts, the desires, returned. And the cycle began again, with me coming to no definitive way to reconcile what I was not hearing in the church with what I heard on the street and the feelings in my body that I could not deny. Like John, and Baldwin himself, after coming out of “astonishment,” though I had committed to God, I still had uncertainty about my life and behavior. As a young
teenager, I saw myself walking down the straight and narrow way, but with desires of the flesh that could destroy me if I was not careful. And though I had many experiences of God after that year, that fear remained. Even today, I still feel some uncertainty about my behavior—what I should and should not do, and what temptations may be too irresistible for me to resist in the future. I’ve come to accept both my natural desires and my uncertainty. One comes from being a human, and the other comes from a genuine desire to do what is right. Perhaps, at some point, uncertainty will give way to instinct, and I will know what to do. Until then, like John, I have to believe that God will “make me strong… to stand against the enemy” (271), and to sin no more.

Baldwin’s complaints about the church in *The Fire Next Time* are as familiar to me as the church idiom he creates in his novel. Christians are often regarded as hypocritical, dishonest and judgmental. These are things that my church and I vehemently try to avoid. Whenever there is another prominent pastor caught in a “scandal,” arguments about “church folk” in general are renewed. Pastors, choir directors and deacons should not be caught in wrongdoing, especially if they represent God on a global stage. Yet, as my Bishop and Pastor often explain, all Christians are human. Neither their titles, nor their appearance of holiness, makes them immune from temptation or erases their free will. They must continue to resist their sinful desires and repent when they fall. It is our responsibility, as fellow saints, to pray for them and take them as an example to be more steadfast.
My Bishop often retells the story of his coming into the church at a young age. In 1973 he was 15 and went to the movies. During the second movie he went to see, he suddenly noticed his Pastor and another member, who was married, sitting in a row in front of him. He immediately remembered the rumors circulating about them in the church. At that moment, as he tells it, he had to make a choice. He could have told the other members and exposed his pastor for what he thought he was doing. Instead, he told no one besides his brother. In the end, the decision was much deeper than deciding whether or not to expose his leader. He had to decide if seeing his pastor possibly committing sin would cause him to change his behavior. If his salvation was dependent on the leader he trusted as a righteous man, seeing him betray that trust would have possibly caused him to abandon his belief in God. Instead, he continued to attend church. In the end, though we were a family, we each are responsible for our own behavior. Sometimes the best things we can do for a fellow saint is pray for them and continue to serve the Lord.

In my church, many of the perspectives of people on the outside have been openly acknowledged. There is a conscious effort put into rejecting the possibility of becoming hypocritical, unloving, and dangerous members of the church that use the Lord’s name in order to absolve themselves from guilt when committing wrongdoing. Love, respect, humility, and honesty are virtues that I have been raised to uphold as a member of Simple Truth Ministries. The lust for power, the love of money, greed, and dishonesty are marks of an imperfect world and an imperfect humanity. But thankfully, this is not all there is. Gabriel Grimes is not a member of my church. I
wonder what kind of first novel Baldwin would have written had he been a member of Simple Truth.

My mother once had to write an essay for a college course in which she defended Christianity against its historical roots in colonialism and chattel slavery. Her thesis was simple: the fact that Christianity was misused by white people does not make it obsolete today. To unravel the legacy of white supremacy from the spread of the Gospel to African diasporic populations would be impossible, though this connection must be acknowledged. Religion was doubtless a large part of the system of white supremacy. But in the eyes of my mother, who believes that her soul has been saved, understanding this fact does not deny the validity of the Good News. Knowing the connection between Christianity and the subjugation of black people did not disrupt her trust in Jesus. Instead, her knowledge of these power structures and her experience of God’s love helped her find a deeper dedication to loving others. Though my congregation acknowledges its troubling origins, we embrace the hope Christianity has brought to our community and our personal lives.

Hope for John is found in the midst of and between the shaky descriptions of the world around him. In the same way that black people today must search for optimism in America’s racist society, the possibility of John’s having a bright future is there, though hidden. Though he exits the church and sees that the world on the outside has not changed, and that he will face the same issues as a believer that he had faced just hours before, he has a new confidence that he will survive the trials of life. To him, the avenue “lay changed under Heaven, exhausted and clean, and new”
The conditions surrounding his family and his life had not changed due to his salvation, but the way he saw them had undergone a shift. He asks Elisha to pray for him, and promises himself that he will make every effort to be better in the future.

The community of the church takes on a new meaning for him: Elisha becomes his mentor, and his future, though not completely clear, is one that he feels no hesitation about. John does not seem to be burdened by the problems that the sixteen and seventeen year old Baldwin came to face about the imperfect church that he preached for. This, along with the experiences of love, community and hope that I have experienced in Simple Truth Ministries, allows me to see Go Tell It as a world that is both fraught with heart-wrenching issues and still retains optimism about the Christian church and the experience of God. Readers leave John on the day of his birthday, fourteen, with a smile on his face and love in his heart, and though they have no assurance of who he will become most like: his mentor Elisha, Gabriel Grimes, or Baldwin himself, he makes a conscious decision to give up his dream of glory and is now “on his way” thanks to his experience on the threshing-floor.

Whether or not he remains on this path is completely up to him.
Chapter Two

Pay Up or Sell Out: Young Black Womanhood and Romance in Baldwin’s Fiction

_Another Country_, published in 1962, was the first novel by Baldwin I ever read. I encountered his third novel while studying abroad in London, enrolled in a course I didn’t want—Thresholds of America: The Spatial Imaginary in American Fiction from 1930. The course was about boundaries, focusing on thresholds constructed, those seen as “natural,” and those that exist between groups. Baldwin’s _Another Country_ tied the boundaries of race to the borders of New York City, my city. But what appealed to me, besides the references to my blinding, terrifying and bewildering home, was the character of Ida. It was her character’s power, fearlessness and beauty that stood out as I devoured the pages of the book. Baldwin had not only brought me back home, thousands of miles away, but brought me face-to-face with someone I wanted to resemble. Ida grabbed my attention and piqued my interest in the way Baldwin wrote black female characters. Prone to rage and irrationality, with a loose tongue and a desire for revenge, she was a fully realized character, and she made me note how often Baldwin drew rich portraits of black women who, like Florence and Elizabeth in _Go Tell It on the Mountain_, are intellectually and emotionally complex. I began to search for black women in Baldwin’s work who looked like her: who were dynamic, interesting, and vocal about the issues of race with which _Another Country_ grapples.
My interest in Baldwin’s black female characters led me to two other works of fiction besides *Another Country*. I found “Come Out the Wilderness,” a short story published in the collection *Going to Meet the Man* in 1965, whose central character Ruth, though far less fierce than Ida, is like her in being complicated and aware of the reasons for her unhappiness. I also came across one of Baldwin’s last novels, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, published in 1974. Like Ruth and Ida, Tish in *If Beale Street Could Talk* is a 20-something year old black woman living in New York, who finds herself in a romantic relationship in which the complexities of race and gender are articulated. Ida and Ruth enter intimate relationships with white men, while Tish becomes engaged to a black man. The social constructs surrounding these relationships infiltrate and affect them. But despite the similar themes of all three works, Baldwin writes his black female characters in completely different manners. Reading *Another Country* was refreshing because Ida seemed to directly expose the intersectionality of race, gender and class, and present it forcefully to the other characters in the book, much to their denial and discomfort. Ruth’s interior struggle in “Come Out of the Wilderness” evokes these same realities in a less direct but similarly powerful way. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, however, Baldwin abandons these complex discussions for what seems to be a far less authentic characterization of a black woman’s experience. Though my readings of these three characters are informed by my personal education and experiences, as well as the stories and wisdom imparted to me by my mother, I identify a wider connection between the black female characters Baldwin creates and our current moment. Baldwin’s complete deviation from a level of depth when constructing the character of Tish has
implications on the topics of race, gender and love that he brings to light in all three works, topics that are defined and affected by one another.

*Another Country* focuses on the lives of a bohemian community of friends and lovers living in New York City in the mid twentieth century. The story hinges on the relationships—romantic, familial and platonic—that once formed around a single character, the charismatic but doomed jazz drummer Rufus Scott. In the first “book” of the novel, Rufus jumps to his death from the George Washington Bridge, and for the remainder of the novel, he is the absent presence around which the other characters revolve. A talented musician, Rufus had moved to Greenwich Village from Harlem with the hope of experiencing the emancipated life that the neighborhood offered at the time. But one of Baldwin’s fundamental points in the novel is that emancipation is not easy, or is perhaps even impossible, to realize. In the Village, Rufus had lived with Leona, a white woman he met in a jazz club in Harlem and with whom he experienced an intense and tormented romance that eventually destroys them both. Despite, or because, of their love for each other, Rufus and Leona cannot keep the inescapable realities of racial oppression and sexual inequality from transforming their relationship. Hurt and angry, Rufus abuses Leona until she is driven to madness and he commits suicide. Rufus’s friends, especially his white best friend Vivaldo, are shocked by his rapid decline and death, and yet, Baldwin shows that none of them are able to recognize the ways in which they contributed to his tragic end. In the novel’s central events, Ida, Rufus’s younger sister, makes the acquaintance of the friends she secretly believes caused to her brother’s death and falls into a relationship with Vivaldo. Her simultaneous ambitions to avenge her
brother, make a living as a singer, and, against her better judgment, become Vivaldo’s lover, lead her to force all of Rufus’s old friends, and herself, to revisit the realities of race, sex, and love in the bohemian Village.

Because Ida struck me as the representation of race-consciousness in the novel, her relationship with Vivaldo became a topic of great interest. She had expressed reservations about her brother’s relationship with a white woman, and she believed that Vivaldo had, in some way, caused her brother’s death. For these reasons, her decision to date a white man, and Vivaldo specifically, was a surprise. However, over the course of the novel, I began to believe in their relationship and love. Though Ida does not make the relationship easy for Vivaldo, and neither is she any less critical about his failure of her brother because they are lovers, I became convinced that she truly cared about him. Their relationship seemed fraught with similar issues faced by Rufus and Leona, but I believed in their potential as the story progressed. And the feelings Baldwin elicited in me provide a crucial point in the novel. The reader is led to be tentatively hopeful about the possibility of Ida and Vivaldo’s relationship while simultaneously remaining aware of their inherent problems. The question of Ida and Vivaldo’s future, Baldwin implies, is the question of America’s future: can the nation as a whole move past its engrained historical issues and reach a place where its citizens can love genuinely? It seems almost impossible to believe in such an idea by the novel’s end.

For Ida, sexual relationships with white men are initially instrumental. These relationships are about wanting to rise up, to somehow make it. She is “going to get through the world, and get what [she needs] out of it, no matter how.”
Simultaneously, she wants revenge, “to be paid back,” and to make everyone who had created the bleak world she had to live in “[pay their] dues” (417, 350). Her need for success and her disregard for the feelings of white men grow exponentially with her brother’s death. She had “counted on Rufus to get her out” of Harlem—she not only believed but “knew” he would do so—and then she was left without him and suddenly felt “like all the other abandoned girls who [couldn’t] find anyone to protect them” (416). And so, without her brother to help her, she resolves to make it on her own. But her desire to use white men is not merely about achieving success, it is a reflection of her unresolved anger at the loss of her brother, who had loved and trusted white people. She felt “robbed” by white people of the “only hope [she] had,” and all she wanted was for them to “[suffer]” (417). This extends to all of Rufus’s friends and Vivaldo, who she believed let her brother down and therefore caused her loss. Her relationship with Vivaldo was intended to be only for fun, while her relationship with Ellis, a producer that eventually becomes her manager, would prove lucrative. Aware of how men acted “like dogs” around her, Ida decides to use that, and do “any damn thing” she wants with them in order to take their resources and put them at her “mercy” (418-419). When it came to black men, on the other hand, she is “afraid” of trying to find a future with one of them. They were dying all around her, being “cut down like grass” (420). And though they were different from white men, they, too, treat her as an object of sexual exploitation. So she cuts herself away from love and decides to be the “biggest, coolest, hardest whore around,” since this is how she is treated by both black and white men (347). Though Vivaldo turns out to be a “real nice boy,” Ida’s learned attitudes about men keep her bound to her rage and
revenge (419). Vivaldo is unable to understand her feelings and their lack of mutual understanding leads to their downfall.

It seemed as though Baldwin had created the world of Another Country as a possible model for the love he believed was necessary to bring about a more equal nation. He’d voiced this idea in The Fire Next Time, calling on “relatively conscious whites” and “relatively conscious blacks” to work together “like lovers” in order to “end the racial nightmare” and “change the history of the world” (The Price of the Ticket 379). As Stephen H. Marshall writes, Baldwin suggested that “erotic love” needed to be the “principal of action” involved in creating change, but he also used the word love to refer to the general coming together of people, most notably blacks and whites, who had been separated by racism (134). Love, in his mind, referred to a process of “revelation, an activity in which the lover discloses himself or herself to the beloved as a condition of pushing the beloved to self-disclosure” (154). However, as his career continued and he saw racial violence and subjugation continue, Baldwin began to question the possibility of the same love he felt was necessary (143). And in fact, the couples in Another Country seem to confirm the near impossibility of this level of vulnerability. He said he had written the novel to “‘show a difference in skin color between two lovers could corrupt everything, even the most sincere and intimate feelings,’” and the events of the novel show that love perhaps was “‘not enough’ to deal with racism” (All Those Strangers 5). Rufus and Leona failed. Ida and Vivaldo seem to fail by the end of the novel. They had attempted, and indeed had tried extremely hard, to come together as lovers, and still they seem utterly

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irreparable by the end of the novel. Leona is driven to madness; Rufus jumps off a bridge. Ida holds Vivaldo as he cries, the weight of her confessions inciting in him a rush of “anger, pity, love and contempt and lust” (430). Faced with the harsh and often terrifying racial realities written on each other, the members of these relationships are unable to disclose their vulnerabilities and remain together. However, if Baldwin continued to write stories testing the limits and possibilities of love throughout his career, the concept seems to have held importance, whether or not it was easy to imagine in practice. If love in the novel fails, but love is still somehow the answer, it would have to be something huge, earth-shattering and miraculous. And something huge, earth-shattering and miraculous seems to be exactly what is needed to solve the complex issues inherent in the American nation.

The story of Ruth Bowman as told in “Come out the Wilderness” presents another complex picture of love through an interracial relationship. The story is collected in the book Going to Meet the Man, published in 1965, only three years after Another Country. Ruth is a twenty-six year old black woman who migrates to New York City from the South after a traumatic experience with her brother and father. The two men find her alone with a boy and immediately, and wrongly, accuse her of fornication. Their belief in her promiscuity and dirtiness, intrinsically connected to her black femaleness, leaves Ruth feeling eternally unclean and dependent on men to ease her worries about her color. She finds herself in a relationship with Paul, a white artist, and shares an apartment with him in Greenwich Village. She can tell that Paul will soon leave her, and this realization causes her to
grapple with her love for him, which is determined by and dependent on her past in the South and the expectations she places on him due to his whiteness.

Her migration to the North had been spurred by the harrowing experience of her father and brother’s accusation. In that moment of being called “black and dirty” by the black men who raised her, she felt indeed “that nothing would ever make her clean” (Going to Meet 208). She runs to the North, to men, and eventually to Paul, who “should have raised her” with his love but had the power to make her feel “blacker and dirtier than ever” (215). Because she believed in the dirtiness placed on her by black men, she depended on Paul’s whiteness to cleanse her. However, he slowly recedes from their relationship, leaving Ruth to contend with her past alone. Fleeing from her family into “several increasingly disastrous and desperate liaisons” and then into Paul’s unsympathetic arms, Ruth comes to realize that her guilt and fear cannot be alleviated by love (209). Each of her relationships with men is marred by racism and sexism until she is left terribly alone. When she flees to a bar to avoid going home to an empty apartment, she sees a boy that reminds her of “Paul . . . of others, of others she had seen and never touched, of an army of boys . . . an army she feared and hated and loved” (224). Again she flees, but this time she “did not know where she was going” (225). As in Another Country, Baldwin presents the possibility and impossibility of love due to the conditions of a sexist and racist America. Ruth loves Paul, but her feelings for him are overshadowed by the knowledge that their relationship is temporary. Suddenly she must face the impossible standards she has for him, which leads her to re-encounter the harm her brother and father inflicted on her, as well as imagine a life in which she is free from her guilt and dependence on
men. Love again seems terribly complicated and nearly unattainable by the double subjugation of racism and sexism black women feel in American society.

In their separate situations of love and romance, and in the landscape of the American nation, Baldwin’s black female characters feel hopelessly trapped. On one hand, they are bound to often exploitative and angry black men who treat them as sexual objects. On the other hand, the white men they may try to connect to regard them with a mixture of fetishization, racial superiority and guilt. For these women, there are few viable options, and Baldwin describes their discontent in powerful ways while simultaneously praising their resilience. Ruth considers her problems in relation to those of her mother who, though in the South and married to a black man, experienced many of the things she herself confronted in a world dominated by men. Ruth reflects on her mother:

She had probably been pretty, she had also wept and trembled and cried beneath the rude thrusting that was her master and her life, and children had knocked in her womb and split her as they came crying out. Out, and into the wilderness: she had placed them in the hands of God. She had known nothing but labor and sorrow, she had had to confront, every day of her life, the everlasting, nagging, infinitesimal details; it had clearly all come to nothing, how could she be singing still? (207)

Ruth’s image of her mother is defined by the hardship her mother must have faced as a black woman, wife and mother. She marvels at her mother’s ability to remain hopeful in the midst of the “labor and sorrow” under the rule of her “master,” her
husband, and her “life,” the structures of racism and sexism. Ruth finds herself tragically unable to imitate her mother’s endurance.

As I read Baldwin’s stories, I was struck both by the ways in which things have changed since Baldwin’s writing and the ways in which romance is still racially determined and marked today. In contemporary pop culture and media, a lot of attention placed on heterosexual women is directed on whom exactly they choose to love, possibly because of the increased visibility of romantic relationships through the Internet. Not only are relationships broadcast on social media platforms, but the pursuit of romance is increasingly tied to technology. Online dating applications like Tinder and OkCupid are popular platforms that allow people to meet and get acquainted without many of the same expectations that may have defined relationships in the past. However, as statistics from these applications show, the pursuit of intimacy is deeply racially marked. A study done by OkCupid from 2009-2014 confirms that black women are the least preferred demographic of women. Among men, black men are second to least preferred. Subsequent studies of dating apps confirm this data—black women are seen as least attractive amongst all possible male mates online. And even when black women receive responses from white men, their appeal is often based on stereotypes. My friends and I have received enough messages about our hair, bodies and sexual preferences to confirm this. This presents a troubling problem for black women who desire, like everyone else, connections with other people. If our main mode of communicating with potential partners is biased against us, the option of love seems quite out of reach.

Despite the difficulty that black women may have finding any partner in light
of these statistics, there are problematic and ridiculous expectations placed on black women’s romantic choices. To some, black women are “supposed to” date within their own race, especially when they are engaged in social justice. To be with a white man is to be disloyal, and calls into question one’s activism. After Serena Williams’s engagement to the white Reddit chairman Alexis Ohanian was announced in December of 2016, the world-renowned tennis player received a barrage of hateful Tweets calling her a “#Traitor” and questioning her identity as a “strong black woman.” Ashley Reese, Contributor for Gurl.com, had her terrible assault pushed aside by the fact that she was dating a white man. After being harassed on the street while with her boyfriend, Reese expressed her rage by telling the story on Twitter. She and her boyfriend received scores of replies questioning his manhood for allowing her to be harmed in his presence, and questioning her activism due to her relationship with a white man.

Though black women highly prefer black men according to the OkCupid study, black men in recent years have spoken out against dating black women. They often cite black women’s “flaws” as their reasoning for this rejection, flaws which are steeped in longstanding stereotypes about black women’s behavior and that often reflect conflicts about the relative power of black women and black men. The phenomenon can be seen, for example, in an episode of the TV show *Iyanla: Fix My Life*, in which Iyanla Vanzant, a relationship expert, attempts to help people facing difficult issues. In one episode, Iyanla speaks to three black men who refuse to date black women. Bo, one of the interviewed men, says that his past experience with black women’s “strong [personalities]” and their refusal to “stay in a woman’s place”
made him stop dating within his race. In 2017, by writing a Medium blog post entitled “Why Black Feminists Annoy You: A Guide for Not All Black Men,” the black feminist suprihmbe took aim at these attitudes, noting how many Black men suggest they would be more willing to listen to Black feminists if they “weren’t so mean . . . weren’t so angry,” and “would . . . fight nicer, quieter, gentler.” Her sarcastic use of these words make obvious the echoes of traditional feminine roles to which black men often wish to confine black women. “The price is just too damn high,” she declares, “for me to keep loving Black men who clearly don’t love me.”

My friends and I, college-educated and a part of the information age, still know that race is so much a part of American society that it will inevitably affect our future relationships. Questions of “loyalty” and “selling out” are ridiculous; as the last choice among women, we are more concerned with dismantling the structures that make us undesirable than with being told how we could supposedly make ourselves more attractive or deserving of love. The truth at which we’ve arrived was that black women will always have to do emotional labor in relationships. Black men have not always liked us. White men sometimes like us because they imagine us to be the answers to their fantasies. There is no way to determine which is better or worse, as it is all exhausting. But ultimately the exhaustion hasn’t made me hope for love any less, or want it any less for my friends. As Ida says and attempts to believe, it is all much easier when you don’t care about men (Another Country 346). But she did care for Vivaldo. My friends and I care. We all want something more than revenge. We want what Baldwin thinks we need more than anything else, and what Ida had tried hard to avoid: love.
If Beale Street Could Talk considers these issues from an entirely different perspective. The only book-length narrative that Baldwin told from the point-of-view of a woman, Beale Street is the story of Clementine, nicknamed Tish, who is in a committed relationship with her childhood friend Fonny, an aspiring sculptor, and comes to be pregnant with his child. The relationship is strained not by the coming child, but because Fonny is in jail awaiting trial for the rape of a Puerto Rican woman. Joined by Fonny’s father, Tish’s family comes together to keep Tish healthy and to work to discredit the white arresting officer whose hatred led him to wrongfully accuse Fonny. Unlike Ida and Ruth, Tish is in a relationship with a black man. This difference makes Beale Street, when compared to Another Country and “Come out the Wilderness,” a completely different picture of blackness, womanhood and “loyalty.” While “Come out the Wilderness,” much like Another Country, uses interracial romance to depict the larger racial landscape of the United States, as well as the necessity of black and white collaboration to solve racial issues, If Beale Street Could Talk exalts racial solidarity through a black couple. Its protagonist, not incidentally, is an example of unyielding devotion to her relationship. She is loyal to her race and loyal to her boyfriend to an unavoidable fault.

In If Beale Street Could Talk, Baldwin abandons the complexity that characterizes Another Country and “Come Out of the Wilderness.” Ida and Ruth, though problematic in some ways, represent authentic and fully realized characters. Tish, however, feels to me terribly flat. Her relationship with Fonny is idealized, and their roles as male and female are much too conventional. In one of her many
reflections on the relationship between men and women, she says that women “must watch and guide” but men “must lead,” and that “a woman is tremendously controlled by what the man’s imagination makes of her” (Later Works 408-409). Tish’s character adheres to this model—as Trudier Harris writes, Tish “is very little without” Fonny (Harris 157-158). Instead of being individuals, “Tish and Fonny are one; or rather, Fonny is the center of the circle and Tish revolves around him” (158). This patriarchal unity even extends to Tish’s family. Her mother, sister, father, and father-in-law to be, support without reservation Fonny and Tish’s child and the effort to get Fonny out of jail.

In this respect, Tish represents a model of womanly devotion and dependence that is far more problematic than anything in Baldwin’s earlier writing. Although Ida and Ruth are characters who also depend on men—Ida only comes to Greenwich Village after her brother’s death and Ruth lives her life wishing for a man to “[release]” her “from guilt and terror”—in their rage and uncertainty, each of these women expresses her frustration at the limitations placed on her due to her color and sex (Going to Meet 215). Like Elizabeth, Florence and Deborah in Go Tell It on the Mountain, Ida and Ruth show, in their regrets and desires, that they are aware of the power not only of racism, but of patriarchy. Ida defends herself against Vivaldo on multiple occasions, allows herself to be angry at him, and refuses to allow him to use her to “[educate]” his white family (Another Country 279). The entirety of “Come out the Wilderness,” meanwhile, shows Ruth struggling over her relationship with Paul, as well as over the relationships to her father and brother that forced her to flee the South and attempt to escape her blackness. By comparison, Tish lives only to support
Fonny. She is completely understanding, completely docile, and completely manageable. Her character has “no reason for complaint,” since “she has no ambition beyond being wife to Fonny and mother to his children” (Harris 158). When Fonny tells Tish that he will dedicate so much time to his art that she will “think [he doesn’t] even know [she’s] there,” she automatically accepts his decision, saying “it’s all right with [her]” (Later Works 422). Fonny puts “the wood and stone . . . first and Tish accepts the order of things, the place and worth that Fonny has assigned to her” (Harris 160). When she is assaulted in a store by a white boy and the white police officer who arrives on the scene picks a fight with Fonny instead of defending her, she steps between the two men and thereby asserts personal power. But Tish’s attempt to de-escalate the confrontation affronts Fonny’s masculine pride, and he tells her not to protect him, a demand she accepts without objection (467). Tish is constantly told that she must be strong enough to bring the child in her womb to life, if only so that Fonny will be given “a whole lot of courage” to keep going (390). All of these roles she automatically embodies.

Perhaps, as a black man, Baldwin was not able to authentically write a black woman’s voice. My trust in his abilities as a writer, however, makes me more critical. He had written compelling black female characters in Go Tell It, Another Country and “Come out the Wilderness.” The shift from complex, fully realized black women to a flat black female character seems deliberate. Baldwin places control over the narrative in Tish’s hands, and as the narrator she should be the most realized character. However, her voice is completely determined and overwhelmed by Fonny’s life and actions. She seems to be merely a spokesperson for an ideal
relationship between black men and women, one that neglects the realities of power that play within the black community.

It is possible that toward the end of his career, Baldwin adopted a version of the conservatism characteristic of many of the black nationalist movements that had become prominent during the 1960s and 1970s. It may even be that Tish and Fonny’s idealized relationship was Baldwin’s response to the criticism his more nuanced portrayals of love and sexuality received from prominent voices of black nationalism. Baldwin had already acknowledged the powerful allure of the Nation of Islam and its patriarchal vision of racial community in The Fire Next Time. But the conservative gender values taught by Elijah Muhammed were aspects of a long tradition of black radical thought, which often emphasized racial pride, strong manhood and the traditional family. That tradition was evident in the Garveyism of the 1920s. It was apparent as well in the appeals to manhood made by Malcolm X in the 1950s and 60s, when, under his leadership, the Nation of Islam was able to mobilize an enormous militant black community in part by emphasizing the values of pride and patriarchy. If with somewhat different political orientations, comparable gender politics were prominent in the Black Panther and other nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As Michele Wallace pointed out in her highly controversial 1979 work Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, in many of its facets, the Black Power movement emphasized masculine pride and respectable womanhood. For a writer like Baldwin, who exposed the racism experienced by black women and

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acknowledged their simultaneous oppression by black men during this time, criticism was inevitable. This criticism was levied most notoriously by Eldridge Cleaver, an early leader of the Black Panther Party, who voiced his harsh opinions of Baldwin’s writing at the same time that Baldwin was increasingly being ostracized from his previous position as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement.

Cleaver’s critiques of Baldwin primarily took the form of homophobic insults, but his disapproval of Baldwin’s sexuality reflected black nationalism’s stress on patriarchal manhood. According to Cleaver in his book *Soul on Ice*, Baldwin harbored “racial self hatred” and a “hatred of masculinity,” which were both a cause and product of his homosexuality (Cleaver 124, 135). It was this supposed hatred of blackness that caused Baldwin to create “homosexual, bisexual, or sexually ambiguous black male characters who are, by definition, effeminate, submissive, and therefore, incapable of resisting white supremacy” (131-133). As Douglas Taylor reveals, Cleaver’s idea of black manhood was determined by “power over women” and specifically “control of black women’s sexuality,” so that a character such as Ida, who uses her sexuality intentionally, or Ruth, who resists her father and brother, would be unsuitable (90). But Tish is obedient enough to allow Fonny to be the black man he should be.

Tish can be read as Cleaver’s ideal woman in action. She poses no threat to Fonny’s manhood and she supports his identity as a black man through her submissiveness. Her sexuality is completely under the control of Fonny: she loses her virginity to him, and they decide to marry, locking her body to his forever. She soon

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7 Douglas Taylor explains the conflict between Cleaver and Baldwin in the essay “Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors” published by the Texas Studies in Literature and Language.
becomes pregnant with his child, becoming the carrier of his lineage and further proving his manhood. Fonny’s heterosexuality is unquestionable, and his dominance in his relationship with Tish goes unchallenged except by white supremacy. In order for Cleaver’s black manhood to exist, black women in relationships with black men must settle into their traditional role and accept their partner’s control. Tish fulfills that role.

And in truth, the insults that Baldwin suffered from Cleaver and the nationalists around him during the 60s affected his later writing. As Douglas Field explains, Baldwin was still trying to “undo the damage’ that Cleaver had caused” as late as the early 80s. In response to Cleaver’s accusation that Baldwin hated blackness, his critiques of Baldwin’s sexuality, and denunciations of Baldwin’s “effeminate” male characters, who did not sufficiently command the sexuality of the women around them, Baldwin “[silenced]—or at least [diluted]— . . . his depictions of homosexuality” and “adopted the voice of ‘representative race man’” (72). He abandoned the complex and troubled possibility of love and interracial relationships, and instead attempted to imagine a situation in which the black nationalists who criticized him were right. When observed by a contemporary reader such as myself, however, this model of black manhood and womanhood gives up too much and accomplishes little.

The black conservatism that caused Baldwin to abandon his previously authentic black female characters is not unfamiliar in our current moment. Prominent writer and Baldwin devotee Ta-Nehisi Coates discusses the conservatism of black
male figures like Bill Cosby, who before becoming notorious for sexual assault had been widely admired among both black and white audiences for the way he offered a stern message of moral uprightness and patriarchal pride. Cosby spoke forcefully to audiences of black men, encouraging them to abandon the traits that he claimed left them poor, incarcerated and outside the lives of their children. In a series of lectures he titled “call outs,” Cosby urged men to combat racism by building communities and caring for their families. As Coates points out, a connection can be drawn between Cosby’s moral revivalism and the gender values of previous black radicals, including Marcus Garvey, Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, and Malcolm X himself. In the same way that working-class African Americans flocked to Garvey in the 1920s and to the Nation of Islam in the 1950s and 1960s, Cosby aimed to give black men something to strive for instead of waiting for white people to give them rights.

Though Cosby has fallen and the Nation of Islam has declined significantly, the tradition of black conservatism has not disappeared. Another version that exists today, though perhaps not as widely accepted, is Hotepism. A belief system in which black autonomy is the goal and self-help is emphasized, Hotepism is a modern variation of black nationalism in which conservative ideas about gender and family are heavily emphasized. Hotepism itself has its roots in the 20th century, but it is now regarded primarily as a topic of ridicule in the media. Where Hoteps go wrong is in their misogyny, homophobia and obvious adherence to conventional gender roles. The royalty of black men and women is emphasized, but at the cost of a solely patriarchal vision. Black feminism is rejected because it threatens to disrupt the black family. As if in an echo of Garvey or Cosby, adherents of Hotepism charge that
radical civil rights movements like Black Lives Matter are merely movements that
depend on white people for aid instead of encouraging black people to carry their own
weight.

Today it is hard to separate the true ideas of Hoteps from the jokes with which
they are often parodied on the internet. A search of the word “hotep” in Google
Images will pull up numerous memes that parody the ideas of Hotep Nation.
According to these memes and their views of feminism, Hoteps are willing to respect
black women as long as they adhere to conservative ideals. One meme depicts a black
professional, with writing above and below her smiling face that says, “Proud to be
black, chemically straightens hair.” Yet another depicts a gorgeous black woman
wearing a traditional head wrap. Around her proud face, in block letters are the
words, “Why be eye candy when you can be soul food?” In these memes the themes
of racial pride and sexual purity are placed at the forefront.

Growing up, I could see both why black conservatism was appealing and why
it remains an inadequate way to address the issues of racism and sexism. The model
implicit in If Beale Street Could Talk represented to me a fantasy that I observed
many people around me try and fail to recreate. Meanwhile, stories like Another
Country and “Come Out of the Wilderness” spoke to me more accurately about the
complexities of black women’s experiences, and about the black woman that I wanted
to become. My mother, with a conglomeration of experiences that made her akin to
all three of these characters, had taught me that I could not be someone like Tish.
Growing up, her influence often determined my actions, and it was her validation that
I always craved. As a single mother of three girls, of which I am the youngest, she was the authority in the house and always voiced her approval or disapproval about the decisions we made. At a young age I rejected the teenage pregnancy, drug use and lack of education that I saw in my neighborhood because I wanted to be successful, but this vision of success began with my mother. She encouraged my love of reading as a child, enrolled me in an academically rigorous middle school against my wishes, and told me that I was capable of accomplishing anything. Perhaps her most notable lesson, however, was the lesson she taught me using the example of her own life.

My mother had been Tish, Ruth and Ida before. Much of her life had been defined by her relationships with men, until she finally found the strength to be alone and, as she said, “realize” the sound of her “own voice.” Growing up on Walton Avenue in the Bronx during the 70s, my mother lived in poverty in a crowded apartment with her grandparents. She found enjoyment in learning and the friendships she formed with her neighbors, one of them being my father’s cousin and, by extension, my father himself. After an accidental kiss on New Year’s Day when she was fifteen, my mother and father began a relationship she described as “fresh and exciting.” She didn’t feel terribly attached to him until her first pregnancy at 16. And then things abruptly changed—neither she nor my father had the money or space necessary for a child. What was fresh before suddenly became serious. Though she wanted children eventually, having a child under the conditions they faced didn’t seem feasible, so my mother made the decision not to have the baby.

She found herself pregnant again during her senior year in high school, and she did not want to make the same decision she’d made before. Though her
pregnancy made her give up dreams of going away for school, she enrolled in LaGuardia Community College and finished her first semester before my older sister Christian was born in February of 1992. The responsibilities my mother faced as a teenage mother likened her to Tish—she was expected to be a caretaker, mother and devoted girlfriend. My parents could not afford a babysitter, and though they collected government assistance, my mother needed to work. Though my father worked as well, my mother did not feel that he contributed enough. Whenever she mentioned Christian’s needs he mentioned his obligations, and he wasted time he could’ve spent helping my mother trying to prove to his friends that he was the same man he was before. My mother’s main concern was that he didn’t show initiative or work towards building a future for her and Christian—“he didn’t want to grow up.” While he was content living with his grandmother in The Bronx, my mother believed that she and her child deserved more. Arguments about their lack of stability made them drift apart and my mother asked herself “What am I doing here?” By the time my sister Tysha was born in March of 1994, my mother was employed by the city and felt that her financial stability would allow her to soon break up with my father. In an attempt to keep her from leaving, my father promised that he was committed to their family, and they married in September of 1995. By the time they moved into our apartment in March of 1996, my mother was expecting another child.

After I was born in October of 1996, things got worse for my parents’ relationship. The dream of being a happily married Tish was gone, and the reality of three children and a failing marriage was harsh. They argued often about money and the unequal share of housework that only my mother seemed to see as an issue. She
often returned home from a night shift to a messy home, and for a while, she dealt
with these things in relative silence. Before long though, my mother’s disillusionment
made her like Ruth. Trapped by the demands of motherhood and bound to someone
that she no longer trusted, my mother felt that she had lost control of her life.
Exhausted and weighed down by obligations she could not meet, she said “forget it,”
to her marriage and began cheating on my father. Though she acknowledges now that
it was wrong, stepping outside of the marriage was my mother’s way of regaining
control of a life that seemed to trap her. She would not abandon her children, but she
desired to abandon an unfulfilling marriage. The end of her relationship with my
father came with relief, but it would be even more years before she really found the
peace she needed.

My mother has always been like Baldwin’s Ida to me—strong, resilient, and
beautiful—but she names her education and return to church as her paths to
independence. When she returned to church, she found the strength to end the
relationship that she had used to get away from my father, and she found the
confidence to be alone. She knew, finally, that there was something better in store for
her in the future. There were so many things she had wanted to do for years,
extending back before she’d had her first child, but finally, she could begin to do
them. In 2011 she re-enrolled in LaGuardia Community College. Her first degree was
in Liberal Arts, which allowed her to take a breadth of classes and reacquaint herself
to the education she had loved growing up but had sacrificed to be a mother.
Education strengthened her desire to fulfill the goals she had long had in mind but
never knew how to accomplish. In 2015 she moved on to Hunter College, where she
took her first Women and Gender Studies class. There, finally, she learned the vocabulary to name the experiences she’d had as a young woman, as well as the things she felt in her current life. She spent some class nights in tears, overwhelmed by the sheer gravity of the information she was learning but had always known. Tears later gave way to anger as she continued learning. She had no idea what to do with this information. How could things change? Would they ever change?

Part of what my mother eventually did with this newfound wealth of knowledge was share it with me. We would spend nights talking about feminism, not merely from the points of view of theorists but from our own experiences. The realization of the connection between herself and a wider history gave my mother power. She joked that her classmates would sigh when she would raise her hand in class—they knew that whatever she had to say would be said passionately. She would do presentations and speak for the whole group, gesticulating with her hands and projecting with her voice until the five, ten or more minutes they were allotted had been used up. She had become like Ida, outspoken about the issues that meant the most to her, and unwilling to quietly suffer under racism and patriarchy.

It is only in hindsight that my mother recognizes what she had in common with Tish, Ruth and Ida and how her experiences are part of a larger struggle faced by black women. Getting pregnant at 16 was not a part of her plan, but it was a story that many people in her area experienced. Today she calls it “a vicious cycle” of “girls in the ‘hood’ getting pregnant and stuck there.” Though she felt like she was the only woman she knew who had to work forty hours and come home and work another shift—cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children and dealing with her husband—
she now realizes that this was not an unfamiliar story. But it was a story that she did not want her children to experience. By the time I was a teenager myself, my personal education and the warnings of my mother made me reject the decisions that characterize Tish. My mother had done her best to be a homemaker, a wife, a mother and a worker, but she only ended up exhausted and made decisions she would regret. She had to come to terms with her obligations and what she could reasonably do, and she had to deal with the repercussions of her failing marriage. Her time as a woman like Ruth, living in uncertainty about her relationship and future, was not pleasant, but made her the person she is today. Outside of the confines of traditional womanhood and outside of a relationship in general, my mother achieved an education that allowed her psychological freedom. I have seen my mother empowered by taking on the traits of a character like Ida, and I have myself been empowered by speaking up about issues that are important to me throughout my life. But even my mother knew, as Ida finds out by the end of *Another Country*, that being a black woman, whether or not you were educated, whether or not you were outspoken, and whether or not you were in a loving relationship, comes with struggles. My mother always believed in the possibility of love, as do I, but her life experiences gave her a new outlook. In order to present herself as a powerful force against the ever-present limitations placed on black women, self-worth and education sometimes needed to be placed before the pursuit of a relationship. Listening to her story, I decided to put myself first and not build my happiness around the love of a man.
In Baldwin’s most compelling works of fiction, the pursuit and experience of love is always complex, and the freedom and happiness of black women is perpetually hindered by racism and sexism. When he draws authentic characters, their power lies in the intensity with which they struggle with these issues. The intersection of racism, sexism and love was not solved, and neither were the discussions of “selling out,” “loyalty” and conservatism settled during Baldwin’s career. To this day, amidst more and more black feminist writings, critical race theory and education in general, the wider society of America continues to question whether or not black women are worthy of love and equality.

It was this understanding of the continued subjugation of my community that attracted me to Baldwin in the first place—Ida in the 1950s was saying things I could relate to in the 21st century. The end of the Civil Rights Movement as a political and historical period did not result in the love that Baldwin once advocated for. Amidst rhetoric of post-racial America, black people continue to be marginalized and black women are widely left out of the discussion. For me, my friends and my mother, our identities and our decisions have racial meaning and implications. The idea of love continues to be racialized. Despite the opinions of people on social media, hoteps, black nationalists and conservatives, racism and patriarchy define the relationships that black women form, regardless of the race of their partners. In the end, if black women desire love, they must be prepared to contend with the issues that attempt to confine them to silenced, small and subjugated spheres of American culture. Baldwin’s narratives allow black female characters to reply to these overbearing structures at times, and silence them yet again at others.
Chapter Three

_We’re in this Together: Moving Forward with the “Negro Problem” in the 21st Century_

On January 6th, 2018, the Brooklyn Museum in Prospect Heights hosted a screening of the 2016 documentary _I Am Not Your Negro_. The film describes the life and work of James Baldwin, as well as the manuscript he was working on before his death, _Remember This House_, about his unique relationships with the murdered Civil Rights leaders Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. I was in attendance with a few of my friends and found myself scribbling notes in the darkened auditorium. I’d seen the film the first time nearly eight months prior, on a plane from Heathrow Airport in London to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City, my home. Then, I had only “Sonny’s Blues” and _Another Country_ in my mind, and was thinking of a project that could include myself, Ida, and a host of other Baldwin characters I hadn’t read yet. This past January, however, the project had become as much about me as it had become about Baldwin and his works, and so I listened to Baldwin’s words as if he was speaking directly to me.

After the film ended, a Brooklyn Museum staff member introduced the activist Jessica Green and Baldwin’s niece, Aisha Karefa-Smart. The two sat on the stage and I scrambled from the top balcony to the prepared microphone downstairs to ask my question.

“Why do people currently have a renewed interest in Baldwin’s work? In what ways are his ideas relevant today?”
Karefa-Smart’s answer was comprehensive, but what I remember most in my awe-struck and nervous excitement was much simpler. She said that Baldwin had been writing for us, for our generation. She drew a distinction between the readers of Baldwin’s works during his career and the generation of new readers of which I and the audience members were a part. Despite the standing ovations he received at his lectures and the debates he won, people didn’t always want to hear what Baldwin had to say. We want to listen now.

Karefa-Smart’s words sounded to me like a call to action. But by speaking to an audience of people across cultures and grouping them into a communal “us,” Karefa-Smart placed on everyone a community responsibility to accomplish the nationwide “growing up” that Baldwin called for during his career (Price of the Ticket 234). The audiences of Baldwin’s lectures were not all-white nor all-black—he called both on “conscious whites” and “conscious blacks” to “create the country” in The Fire Next Time (379). Karefa-Smart told us to aspire to live up to that mission today. We were the “relatively conscious whites” and “relatively conscious blacks” that Baldwin had referred to. And if Karefa-Smart’s words were true, we had a lot of work to do, together.

“Previous Condition,” Baldwin’s first published short story, originally appeared in 1948 in Commentary magazine and was later reprinted in Baldwin’s 1965 book Going to Meet the Man. A story that emerged out of the uncertain political environment of the late 1940s, Baldwin’s narrative details the reflections and thoughts of Peter, a struggling actor secretly living in a white neighborhood in
downtown New York City, and describes Peter’s interactions with the two white people to whom he is closest, his friend Jules and his lover Ida. (In this story, Baldwin used the name Ida for a white woman, although he would later use the same name for Ida Scott, the black female protagonist of *Another Country.* ) Readers experience both the injustice of the racial discrimination Peter faces throughout the events of the story and the inward strife that comes as a result of his experiences. Peter is from New Jersey, what he calls “the nigger part of town” where he was faced with widespread poverty and hardship. Growing up, he began to “[hate his] mother for living there” and “all the people in [his] neighborhood.” He resents the behavior of his neighbors, highlighting that they “went to church,” “got drunk,” “were nice to the white people” and “took . . . crap” from their landlords (*Going to Meet* 85). It is this cycle of poverty and false humility that he decides to reject by leaving home, as Baldwin himself did, to become an artist. Peter saw that “older kids [he] knew finished school and got jobs and got married and settled down.” Settling down meant “[bringing] more black babies into the world and [paying] the same rents for the same old shacks,” a pattern he believed leaving Jersey would free him from (87). However, he comes to find that the struggles he saw his family and neighbors face in Jersey were not tied to place. Though he avoids “settling down” in Jersey, he would be faced with similar living arrangements, and would need to adopt a similar behavior of deference to ensure his survival. He ends up living in a “hideous” room after travelling through a host of cities and finding little success in acting, and depending on the help of a white friend to find somewhere to live (84).
The main event of Peter’s story comes when he is kicked out of his room solely because he is black. The descriptions of his dread are poignant: he lays in his bed expectantly listening for footsteps, and when they come, he “[trembles] like a fool” and his “heart . . . [beats] so hard [he thinks it will] tear [his] chest apart” (90). Though he tries to keep the landlady from kicking him out, she threatens him with the police and he gives up. Not only is his fear palpable, but his anger is too. He “[wants] to kill her . . . take a club, a hatchet, and bring it down with all [his weight], splitting her skull down the middle” (91). However, neither of these emotions is isolated to the event of losing his room. Throughout the story, Peter expresses the constant anguish he feels and the way racism has harmed his psyche. In order to survive, he has learned to “get by” by “[acting] out the role [he is] expected to play” (88) and “[using] his color like a shield” (89). But this constant state of role playing damages him. As a result, he feels “betrayed,” “beaten as a person” and as if he “[has] no honest place to stand” (89). He becomes “sick to death” and so afraid that he feels he is “not a person any more.” His constant fear and rage makes him “worried about what’s happening to [him] . . . inside” (93).

Though Peter’s struggle is completely personal, and emphasizes his complex inner feelings, the story is not merely his own. Peter articulates it not only to the reader, but to the white friends surrounding him, making it their problem as well. As he does in Another Country and as he did throughout his career, Baldwin links Peter’s intense suffering and his personal relations to a larger question about American national destiny. If a nation built on “freedom” and “liberty” created conditions in which someone could experience such a removal from their personal identity, was
anyone in the country truly free? Throughout the story, “God save the American republic,” is repeated as an ironic refrain to highlight the phrase’s fallacy.

Though the original publication of “Previous Condition” is far removed in time from its publication as a part of Going to Meet the Man, the fact that Baldwin included the story in a book produced nearly two decades after it was first published flags its continued significance through those years. Peter’s anguish, the racial discrimination that defined his life, the white sympathy (or lack thereof) that surrounded him and his disillusionment with the idea of everyone in the country being “in this together,” remained crucial issues to Baldwin in the mid-1960s, as they had been at the end of the 1940s. And they remain significant today. But what had happened in those seventeen years?

The years surrounding the 1948 publication of “Previous Condition” had been defined by the Second World War and the shifting politics of the post-war years, when the once strong leftist and anti-racist community began to fall apart when faced with the events of the Cold War. “Previous Condition” was published by Commentary, the same magazine that brought Baldwin’s voice as a non-fiction writer to the public with the publication of the essay “The Harlem Ghetto: Winter 1948” just months earlier. According to Commentary, “Previous Condition” heralded “an important new talent on the literary scene.” And part of the importance of Baldwin’s story lies in how Peter’s struggle and the reactions of his white friends directly challenged the same alliance between liberal whites and blacks that Baldwin’s predecessors and colleagues had so depended on for future racial equality. The

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8 A digital version of the original publication of “Previous Condition,” complete with this commentary, can be found on the official Commentary magazine website.
publication of this story exposed the blind dependence white liberals and leftists had on a relation with politically engaged African Americans that was actually strained.

But what had allowed this “new talent” to flourish was his movement to Greenwich Village soon after the death of his stepfather in 1943. Though his years in the neighborhood were often marred by financial struggle, Baldwin experienced an environment of experimentation and freedom that he would reflect on in much of his subsequent fiction. Not only did Peter’s story occur in The Village, much of the action of Another Country, published in 1962, occurs in that neighborhood, and Paul and Ruth in the short story “Come Out the Wilderness,” published along with “Previous Condition” in Going to Meet the Man, live in The Village together. And just three years after the publication of Going to Meet the Man, when Baldwin returns to the struggles of an actor in Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone through the narration of Leo Proudhammer (a novel which can be read in some ways as a revision or expansion of Peter’s story), a large part of Leo’s reflections take place in The Village. The author of “Previous Condition” was deeply affected by the years he spent in that neighborhood, and the collection in which his first short story is included ties the tensions of allyship from 1948 to 1965 and beyond.

During the 40s and 50s, The Village was a place of artistic experimentation, youth, and personal freedom. It was its own world, distinct from other neighborhoods in Manhattan and the city in general. Baldwin viewed the Village plausibly as the epicenter of a nationwide quest for a new identity. After World War II, Americans were not only more cognizant of the issues of their nation, they began to gain the
vocabulary to talk about them. The war had exposed the atrocities people were capable of inflicting on others and helped to create a broader questioning atmosphere. Exciting new styles in the arts—abstract expressionism, bebop, modern dance—were drawing young artists to bohemian neighborhoods while government policy such as the G.I. Bill allowed people to pursue new philosophical languages through higher education. The Village was at the forefront of all these developments during Baldwin’s time there. At the same time, the nation was holding its breath, aware of the possibility of tragedy striking to destroy it all again. The uncertainty of the future made people “turn inward towards aspects of the self” (Graebner 2), trying to repair and realize their own identities in the context of a nation that had failed its promise to create equality. The uncertainty of the future made a willingness to explore the self more important. It was this inward reflection that Baldwin had already begun through the detailing of Peter’s mental dilemma in “Previous Condition.”

The Village became home to avant-garde writers and artists who would soon be known as the greatest in the country, and others who would remain unknown. The geography was different from the rest of Manhattan, with “crooked, twisted and turning” streets disrupting the perfect grid placed on the island’s topography. It was also different from the rest of the city as a whole, with “small, cozy brick or frame houses . . . rather than skyscrapers,” and “a quietness . . . compared to the taxi-blasting traffic, street crowds, and vendors of Broadway, midtown, and Morningside Heights” (Wakefield 116). While some writers would reflect on Greenwich Village in

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9 Anatole Broyard in *Kafka Was the Rage* and Dan Wakefield in *New York in the Fifties* have chronicled their own experiences in the distinct neighborhood of Greenwich Village during the 40s and 50s. William Graebner discusses the distinct culture of the post-war 1940s in *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s.*
the 1940s as a time of consciousness-building, expanding knowledge, and reading, Baldwin would call on his time there as a backdrop for his characters to simultaneously experience freedom and personal disorientation. Through a life in art that eventually leads him to Greenwich Village, Peter escapes the family upbringing that he so resented, but he is forced to encounter the realities of his nation and decide how they will affect him. Despite the rhetoric of unity that Ida and Jules emphasize, Peter cannot escape the hierarchies ingrained in American society, and understanding the discrimination others experienced does little to alleviate his personal distress.

Baldwin himself escaped to The Village in his young adulthood, but he soon found that the neighborhood was still a part of a larger racial reality. He momentarily embraced the absence of everything that defined his old life, though he would be forced to re-encounter it all later. But gone, at least for the moment, were the days of preaching, his father, and Harlem.

Harlem had been the place where Baldwin reluctantly accepted—and finally abandoned—his familial obligations. For the same reason, it was a place in which he could not develop his individuality. In his essays, as in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin made it clear that the neighborhood he’d grown up in was not suitable for him or its other inhabitants. In “The Harlem Ghetto,” Baldwin described the neighborhood of his birth as a “slum” (*Price of the Ticket* 2). With buildings that were “old and in desperate need of repair,” streets that were “crowded and dirty,” food that was “expensive” and “of inferior quality” and rent prices that were “10 to 58 percent higher than anywhere else in the city,” living in Harlem was unacceptable (1). Like John Grimes, Baldwin had stood on a hill in Central Park wanting something else,
something that wasn’t so ruined and dirty to its core. Greenwich Village was home to artists and intellectuals; Harlem was neglected and being ripped apart by drugs. It was understandable that Baldwin would want to leave, just as Peter considered leaving his slum in New Jersey his ultimate goal. Both Baldwin and his character would place in the arts the power to take them from the poverty and dirt of their old lives, towards a freedom and success that ultimately their race makes difficult to claim.

In many ways, I myself had experienced an overwhelming desire to leave the land of my birth for something “better.” I’d grown up in the poor neighborhood of Highbridge in the Bronx, and from a young age I thought of leaving as my long-term goal. Education was my ticket out. College was not only possible, but necessary—it was the starting point for my self-discovery and the place where I would not only challenge myself mentally, but become the person that I wanted to be and really was. These expectations led me to choose an out-of-state campus in Wesleyan. I would not remain physically tied to the neighborhood that I believed had stifled me since childhood. When I finally did graduate high school, I did so with the eagerness of one who would be leaving home to start her life.

In fact, the Wesleyan I experienced resembles the Greenwich Village portrayed by Baldwin—both in promise and disappointment. Much as The Village Baldwin encountered was a neighborhood distinctive for its bohemian values and for its emphasis on artistic and sexual freedom, the community of Wesleyan University was a place where I thought I would be free of all the power structures that commanded my behavior in The Bronx. On an enclosed campus where all the
students had the goal to learn, there would be little time to focus on our differences. Peter believed that leaving Jersey would ensure that he escaped the cycle of poverty that trapped those who “[settled] down” back home. He desires to escape the bonds of the specific place in which he lived, so he leaves. I had a similar experience at Wesleyan. I arrived on campus with the expectation that the college I had enrolled in was a place where I would lay claim to a better future than I would’ve had if I stayed home. I was confident that though I would be surrounded by new and unfamiliar groups of people, I would soon join the fold of the community and the issues of identity that had plagued me back home would not penetrate my new environment.

It was Wesleyan’s reputation as a liberal institution that made me believe that my post-secondary education could be free from the issues I’d faced in New York City. Leaving my neighborhood meant leaving the danger of drugs, policing and inferior access to education that characterized The Bronx. I would escape the place it seemed I, my family and all my neighbors had been trapped in. But at the same time, I would be given a more suitable environment in which I could talk about the experiences that I’d left behind. Though Wesleyan is a predominately white institution, I experienced the solidarity and strength of students of color in classes like African American Fiction and in the #AFAMisWhy campaign that sought, in the years before I matriculated, to ensure that the African American Studies department continued to exist and allow students to learn about some of the most ignored histories. But it was not merely students of color who occupied those classes or participated in those campaigns. The white population of the university took an active role in keeping open discussions about the issues of the nation. If power structures
were going to have any space in my college life, I wanted them to be topics of
discussion in the classroom, not daily realities. I was excited to meet white people
who were aware of systems of oppression and who were actively attempting to undo
them alongside those that they affected directly. I looked forward to being a part of a
unified “us” at Wesleyan.

And indeed, that hope was partly realized. The “Wesleyan bubble” was
something that I did, over time, come to find myself inside. Like the Village, the
Wesleyan campus was a place that brought young people together to learn from each
other, to explore their artistic and academic passions, and to experiment with
whatever they liked. What the community of campus was not missing, however, was
influence from the structures that I encountered in New York City and that were
informed by the racial, sexual and colonial history of the United States. Students in
my African American Studies classes often remarked about courses where white men
dominated discussions. When there were “Black Lives Matter” posters put up in the
campus center, someone scratched out “Black” in pen and wrote “All.” Protected by
anonymity on a campus app called YikYak, students advocated for the protection of
“free speech” at the expense of the safety of students of color. This would be no place
where I could escape from blackness or the issues that came along with it.

In addition to Peter’s personal turmoil regarding his experiences, much of the
story’s focus is on the relationships between Peter and the two white characters he is
good friends with. Readers experience not only the fear, anger, confusion and
exasperation that Peter feels in response to being kicked out of his room—which is
merely a small instance in an entire life of facing the consequences of being black—but also the points of view of the “relatively conscious whites” who Peter trusts to support him. Here Baldwin was problematizing the beliefs of the political left, including the *Commentary* for which he wrote, and the Civil Rights activists of the 1940s, who believed in the possibility of an alliance between African Americans and white liberals on the basis of their shared liberalism and experiences of discrimination. Elliot Cohen, the editor of *Commentary* when “Previous Condition” was first published, “interpreted race hatred and prejudice very widely to include blacks as well as Jews” (Field 21). He, like others, took for granted a connection between white and black communities that eventually was revealed to be imperfect. Baldwin exhibited the same attitude that Lawrence Jackson described of Thomas Sancton, one of “healthy suspicion” towards “the helping hands lent” to black people in their cause for justice (Jackson 166). With this short story, Baldwin differentiated himself from Cohen and even his old mentor, Richard Wright, whose Bigger Thomas had come to feel an allegiance with “all men” by the end of *Native Son* (Wright 362).

The publication of this story, especially in a Jewish leftist magazine, critiqued the uncritical belief that “enlightened” whites, including the working class and Jewish people, and Civil Rights activists could unite for mutual freedom. Baldwin was not convinced of that. He continued to “argue that Jews were disadvantaged—but at least they were white,” and believed that “race . . . took precedence over class as the key problem of the American Left” (Field 22). Baldwin acknowledged that the experience of discrimination was not the same amongst oppressed groups. As Peter articulates
later, his skin color was written on his body, making his daily life more difficult than even his best friend.

But Baldwin’s story does not outright reject the possibility of alliance and abandon it as useless. The question of unity, shared responsibility and togetherness returned throughout his writing career, both in essays such as *The Fire Next Time* and fiction such as *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*. And even in “Previous Condition,” though Baldwin critiques the ideal of unity, he does not completely dismiss it. Both the difficulty of alliance and its possibility, and perhaps its necessity, are present in “Previous Condition.”

Jules Weissman, who is importantly Jewish, rents the room in Peter’s name and is the first to learn that Peter has been kicked out. Seeing his friend’s obvious frustration, Jules insists that Peter can “scream if [he wants] to,” though he immediately tells him to “take it easy” when he does so. Unable to hold back, Peter reveals that he is “sick to death” of “fighting” to get “what everybody else takes for granted,” and that he is “scared” of what is “happening to [him].” He cannot stand being in such a constant state of fear, anger and exasperation, and he feels as if he should give up. Unable to articulate his emotions and simultaneously desperate to, he says that he “[doesn’t] understand,” “[doesn’t] want to understand” and “[spends] all [his] time trying to forget” what it feels like to live as a black man. At the end of Peter’s tirade, Jules acknowledges the fact that though he has experienced discrimination as a Jewish man, he cannot “help” Peter, neither can he really understand his plight. Instead, he tells Peter to “take a walk, get drunk,” and concludes with “we’re all in this together.” Despite these friendly words, the two part
on slightly unresolved terms—Peter remarks that he feels as though “hatred had corrupted [him] like cancer in the bone” (Going to Meet 93-94). However, Jules Weismann’s display of sympathy and limited empathy for his friend’s problems evoke a level of unity that is unshared by another of Peter’s friends.

Ida is another of Peter’s friends, but she is also his lover and benefactor. Like Jules, Ida is familiar with some facets of Peter’s experience, and she also cannot fully understand what Peter goes through as a black man. She comes from a “family called shanty Irish” and therefore “[knows] a little about poverty [herself].” However, Ida has been able to leave behind her humble origins by marrying a rich man and is therefore able to “support attractive young men” like Peter (88). Unlike Jules, however, Ida shows little real sympathy for Peter’s feelings. She uses her past poverty to accuse Peter of being paranoid about the direct connection between blackness and hardship but does not acknowledge her own financial and racial privileges. She believes that there are “worse things” than chain gangs, accusing Peter of being a coward for deferring to white people in order to avoid jail (89). When she hears that Peter has lost his room, she tries to get him to be brave about the situation and tells him “not to feel so badly,” citing the issues of “famine and disease” in Europe to convince Peter that his problems are not isolated nor insurmountable. She tells him that he must “learn to live with” the conditions he “can’t help.” Like Jules, she says “we’re all in this together,” but unlike in the case of Jules, she uses the phrase to dismiss Peter’s personal experiences (96). Ida’s relationship with Peter is defined by her pretension and condescension, as well as her economic power over him. The fact that she financially supports him allows her to use “maternal [tricks]” against him and
dismiss his feelings in favor of her own opinions. In response to her dismissal, Peter screams at her in a public restaurant, and immediately remembers who they are: “a black boy and a white woman, alone together” (97). Fear closes around him yet again.

For Jules and Ida, the phrase “we’re in this together” has different meanings and implications. For Jules, the use of the phrase acknowledges the limits of his personal understanding about the specific racial realities that Peter faces, but simultaneously offers help. From listening to Peter’s tirade, he comes to learn that the real issue is not his friend being evicted, but the fact that Peter cannot change the fact that racial discrimination defines his life. Though Jules cannot singlehandedly alleviate the problems Peter must face, he is able at least to validate Peter’s feelings and offer his room as a place for his friend to stay. Between Jules and Peter is relatively equal footing—they are friends that are able to listen and relate to one another. Though Jules’s experiences with anti-Semitism are not the same as Peter’s encounters with anti-black racism, he loves Peter enough to acknowledge his struggles as valid though he cannot completely understand them. When telling Peter “we’re in this together,” Jules makes himself and Peter not merely friends but sharers in a larger social and political issue. Implicit in this use of the phrase is the promise of unity. By acknowledging the benefits of whiteness he enjoys and helping his friend in the ways he can, Jules becomes an ally to his friend.

Ida, on the other hand, emphasizes the struggles of others over those of Peter in her use of the phrase. She places above Peter’s experiences her own knowledge, and she is only able to prioritize her own opinions over her friend’s because they do not have an equal or platonic relationship. As an economically privileged white
woman, Ida manipulates Peter’s poverty in order to make herself not only his benefactor but his superior. Instead of acknowledging the validity of the struggles her friend faces, she attempts to convince him to ignore the very real things he experiences because others, in other places, are experiencing comparable or worse things. She uses the phrase not to become an ally to Peter’s experiences, but to equalize his struggles to those of others and therefore dismiss all of them. Though the phrase implies a joint responsibility and understanding, Ida uses it as a means of ignoring what should not be ignored—the ever-present realities of racism in America.

On the night that Donald Trump was elected, I lay in bed at Wesleyan refreshing the open tab on my laptop. Google had the numbers of the Electoral College votes, and as they went up, my hopes seemed to sink. The weight of my feelings and the reality of the situation would not hit me until around Thursday, but as Tuesday night became Wednesday I found myself laughing in sheer disbelief. I skipped class the next day. I could not sit in a class about women’s liberation—in which I was the only black woman—when I felt like a level of freedom had just been lost. I could not sit among white women whose stories were represented nearly every week and try to make sense of why white women rejected the need for intersectional feminism when they also had voted for someone that hated both them and me.

The campus was silent on Wednesday. I walked to work in the campus center amidst ghosts. Our liberalism, which we had depended on, loved, tried to nurture, and, at times, hid behind, had failed us. I was shocked by the people hugging each other and crying in the campus center. I had not yet been moved to tears myself, and
so it all seemed a little ridiculous. Every visitor that came into the office had something to say, though, and I answered over and over with a forced smile and a sarcastic laugh. What could we have expected, really? Did we really think that “liberty and justice for all” was what our nation truly wanted? Had America ever been great to every citizen?

While I was at work, a classmate from my Women’s Liberation and Literature class came into the office. Before she left, she asked me if I was going to class. I smiled and answered, “No.” She immediately nodded and said something like “Yeah.” The look she gave me, however, said “I am so sorry.” I was taken aback and could do nothing but smile until she walked out the office. When she had gone, I tried to understand what feelings that look had incited in me. She meant well, I was certain, but still a large part of me felt like crying. The look she gave, coupled with her quick nod of understanding when I told her I would not go to class said, “I am so very sorry. Get some rest; we can figure this out together.” The fact of the matter, in my mind at that moment, was that she could not understand, and sorry didn’t mean anything. The fact of the matter is, even today, that no, she could not understand, no, sorry didn’t mean anything, and even I would never know how much other communities of people had to lose because of this election.

When the reality of the event sunk in a few days later, the lack of surprise that I had voiced to office visitors remained my overwhelming feeling. For months we had taken Donald Trump as a joke. Countless people had made fun of his hair, dismissed his comments about Mexicans, and altogether believed that the majority of the country felt the same way. The things he said about his daughter, his gesticulations,
his insults directed at the other candidates and his “wall” idea were all a part of a joke that not everyone thought was funny. And in the end, 58% percent of white voters chose Trump, as did 53% of white women voters. \(^{10}\) We are not post-racial. Neither is there unity among women of all races. But what was perhaps more fascinating was the distress, confusion and outright grief being exhibited by white people. I hadn’t seen students of color hugging each other in the campus center. A friend of mine told me that her mother, a political refugee and immigrant, merely shrugged when she learned of the election results. White people were surprised. On the faces of those whom the Trump presidency would most directly affect was the word, “Duh!”

Soon after the results of the election, the comedian Dave Chappelle hosted *Saturday Night Live*. One skit, “Election Night,” pictured him in a lavish apartment with three white women and one white man. The skit chronicles their attitudes and opinions throughout the night as the electoral votes get counted. As time passes in 30-minute increments, the terror on Chappelle’s friends’ faces becomes more real. They drink, take Xanax and dismiss the states that vote red, continuing to hope that Clinton will be elected. All the while, Chappelle’s outlook goes unchanged and he sarcastically makes jokes about his friends’ words. When Chris Rock arrives in the skit, the two black men openly laugh at the confusion of their white peers, bringing up slavery when one of the women realizes that America is racist and bursting into laughter when Trump is elected and someone proclaims that this was the worst thing America had ever done.

\(^{10}\) Statistics about the 2016 election have been published by CNN in an November 23, 2016 article titled “Exit Polls,” as well as “7 Charts Show Who Propelled Trump to Victory” published by Business Insider on November 10, 2016 Forbes, and “Exit Polls: A Broad Range of White People Voted Trump for President,” published by Vox on November 9, 2016.
Perhaps my peers and I had all placed too much hope in the same things that I had expected when coming to Wesleyan. We had hoped, believed, and were so sure, that the liberal attitudes with which we tried to guide the campus community reflected the direction of the entire nation. Like the white liberals of the 1940s, we had not acknowledged the complexities of our alliance until it failed. In the laughter and dismissal surrounding the 2016 election, there was no real acknowledgment of the possibility that Trump could actually be elected. In the end, the joke was on us. The Obama presidency for many had symbolized progression, as it had for Ta-Nehisi Coates, who wrote that Obama’s election signaled to many that the “prohibition” against black success had been lifted. After eight years of “a healthy and successful black family spanning three generations,” it was easy to get comfortable in the possibility of lasting positive change. But if there was anything that being at Wesleyan had taught me, it was that there was no place in America where I could be completely free from the racial history that defined my African American experience. These issues had not gone away when I stepped out of The Bronx and into Middletown, and the “Wesleyan bubble” did not cover the landscape of the entire country. And this was what we all were forced to learn in November 2016.

Like Baldwin, I see both the possibility and problems inherent in the idea of unity and allyship. We had seen firsthand that relationships, especially between groups of people, whether or not they had similar goals or experiences, were never simple enough to be defined by a single goal. But at the same time, the problems of our nation are not affected by one group, so it is impossible to be solved by a single

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11 Coates writes extensively about the symbolism of the Obama administration in his article “My President Was Black,” published by The Atlantic.
identity. Allyship should not be thrown away, but neither should it be trusted easily. Coming together must be done, but we also must recognize the array of experiences and privileges in our nation. Discrimination, prejudice and racism are not felt the same way across groups or even amongst individuals. In order to come together in the way Baldwin wanted, we would need to be open about the issues that defined our everyday lives and ultimately affected our personal minds. One the other hand, we would need to be open to the vulnerability of others, and acknowledge the ways in which our experiences aligned and vastly differed. This is easier said than done, as Baldwin knew. What he wrote in 1948 had not been resolved by 1965, and as Karefa-Smart said, it is being retold in 2018. In the same way that Peter leaves Jules’s apartment unsure if the two men can be friends, it is hard to know what exactly the next steps are in “[saving] the American republic,” if such a thing is possible. What we need to do now, if we could do anything, was find some way to move forward, and do so together.
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