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“THE SONG WE SING”: NEGOTIATING BLACK NATIONALISM AND QUEERNESS IN

JAMES BALDWIN’S LATE NOVELS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

ELLIOT N. LONG

June 2013

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## ABSTRACT

Despite his exclusion from the Black Arts Movement, James Baldwin includes in his later novels many elements of Black Nationalism, including a focus on black communities, black music, Pan-Africanism, and elements of separatism. In his inclusion of queer sexuality, Baldwin pushes against the typical bounds of Black Arts writings, expanding the limits of the genre. Contrary to the philosophy of Black Nationalism, which depends upon solid definitions of blackness, heterosexuality, and masculinity, is Baldwin's tearing down of identity categories through queering sexuality, gender, and race. This thesis examines James Baldwin's late novels, which remain undervalued and under-read, in terms of how Baldwin negotiates the two contradictory lines of argument: Black Nationalism and the queering of identity categories. His handling of these opposing arguments allows Baldwin to recognize social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality and their power and to challenge their constraints. Considering Baldwin's *Another Country* and *Just Above My Head*, I argue for the reappraisal of these late novels for their artistic value and for their inclusion in the Black Arts canon.

## DEDICATION

To J., for putting up with two years of my bringing the office home with me, of long summer camps, and of *Doctor Who* re-runs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my fellow students Joshua Davis, Dottie Knight, and Scarlett Cunningham for dinners and board game nights, for sharing their books, and for many road trips across the South in search of good food and good music.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE.....	21
CHAPTER TWO .....	50
REFERENCES .....	73
VITA.....	78

## INTRODUCTION

*“In my mind, the effort to become a great novelist simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.”* – James Baldwin

Born in Harlem in 1924, James Baldwin made it his mission to bear witness to the experience of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century United States. Even today, Baldwin remains one of the most important essayists on African American experience—essays notable for their prophetic tone and for their ability to speak to and reach white Americans. Baldwin exploded onto the literary scene with the publication of his celebrated and controversial essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” in 1949. This essay was later published in *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin’s first essay collection, in 1955. The collection established Baldwin as an authoritative voice on African American experience. He went on to publish seven essay collections, six novels, two plays, a screenplay, a short story collection, a poetry collection, and many other articles and reviews in his lifetime.

Baldwin spent the majority of his life abroad, having left for Paris, France, at the age of 24 in a self-imposed exile. He credits this move from Harlem as saving his life, as if he had stayed he surely would have killed himself or killed someone else. After leaving, he never returned to the United States for a great length of time. Baldwin lived in other countries abroad as well, primarily spending time in Turkey and Switzerland when not in France. His years abroad spawned many essays including “Equal in Paris” and “Stranger in the Village” in *Notes of a*



*Native Son*. Despite his time abroad, Baldwin remained interested in what was happening in the United States and made several trips back to take part in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, including taking two trips through the American South on writing assignments and to speak on behalf of CORE and SNCC. Other than *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's novels are primarily set in the United States—Harlem, more specifically. Baldwin's writings remained distinctly American, always using this international perspective to reflect what it reveals to him about race and about being an American.

Despite living and writing until 1987,<sup>1</sup> Baldwin's best-known works were written before 1963. As David Leeming, Baldwin's biographer, points out, "For too many readers of Baldwin, the interest in his work stops with *The Fire Next Time*" (*Re-Viewing* vii). Baldwin is best remembered for his essays, namely those collected in *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time*. When remembered for his novels, he is typically remembered for his first three novels: *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country*. Baldwin's final three novels—*Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just Above My Head*—were seen as failures by many and remain largely undervalued and under-read. Baldwin's early work launched Baldwin as a major writing force, but his later works were seen to be lacking or behind the times. As stated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Baldwin, who once defined the cutting edge... was now a favorite target for the new cutting edge" (quoted in Field 462).

This difference in reception between Baldwin's essays and his novels is often attributed to the homophobia of Baldwin's readers and critics. Baldwin's novels explore queer sexuality, yet this topic is rarely addressed in his essays, which focus mostly on race in America. It is no coincidence that Baldwin's best-known novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is the one in which

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin died of esophageal cancer on December 1, 1987.

queer sexuality is submerged in favor of exploring racial identity. Baldwin's choice to write about queer sexuality and his inclusion of white main characters in *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country* led to challenges of Baldwin's status as an African American writer. As Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson write, Baldwin was "vilified by fellow blacks for not being black (read *masculine*) enough" (250). This was particularly true among writers of the Black Arts Movement. Despite Baldwin's attempts to assimilate some of the language of the Black Arts Movement into his later writings, he was seen as "passé" by 1973 (Judson 251).

This homophobia led to a split in Baldwin studies in which his queer works were absorbed by gay and lesbian or queer studies and his other works more focused on race were absorbed by African American studies. Calvin C. Hernton overlooks Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*—typically constructed as a detour from Baldwin's real work about African American experience—in favor of Baldwin's play *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) as a great achievement because, in the words of Marlon B. Ross, "it does not harbor any tincture of same-sex desire, which by implication here becomes concern with nonblack desire" (17). Ross argues that this split operates to "salvage his [Baldwin's] legitimacy as a racial spokesman" for some scholars of African American literature (17). On the other hand, queer scholarship declared Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, to be "a foundational text for gay culture and for gay and lesbian studies," yet this has happened "at the expense of the novel's racial implications" (Ross 14). While African American criticism has often ignored the queer in Baldwin's work, the opposite is also true; gay and lesbian scholars often ignored the racial implications of Baldwin's writings. Perhaps it is for this reason that Baldwin's later novels that directly address a queer black identity have remained largely untouched by criticism until more recently.

Recent scholarship has begun addressing race and sexuality in Baldwin's work in relation to one another. As Ross also points out, the development of cultural studies provided a framework with which to analyze Baldwin's works through multiple lenses simultaneously. A renewed interest in James Baldwin's writings appeared around 2000, including the publications of *James Baldwin Now*, ed. by Dwight McBride (1999); *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen*, ed. by D. Quentin Miller (2000); *James Baldwin's Later Fiction: Witness to the Journey* by Lynn Orilla Scott (2002); and *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* by Clarence E. Hardy (2003). Randall Kenan has also been active in Baldwin scholarship in the past decade, releasing a biography of Baldwin in 2005, an essay collection entitled *The Fire This Time* (2007) as an homage to Baldwin's essay collection, and *The Cross of Redemption* (2011), a collection of Baldwin's previously uncollected writings edited by Kenan. This renewed interest in Baldwin since 2000 has led to the explorations of some of Baldwin's lesser-known writings and to attempts to write about the relationship between race and queer sexuality in Baldwin's works rather than addressing one or the other.

Some critics have argued that Baldwin's writings became more nationalistic with the passing of time. In describing a shift in Baldwin's later work *No Name in the Street* from his earlier work *The Fire Next Time*, Barbara Judson and Andrew Shin write:

For his part, Baldwin tried to resist the erosion of his cultural authority by reinventing himself in the language of the new vanguard—in the very terms of the black left which composed jeremiads against a view it regarded as outmoded.

Two essays published a decade apart witness Baldwin's shift from a vision of a unitary culture to a more separatist stance.

Judson and Shin argue that *The Fire Next Time* shows “interconnected destinies of black and white America,” but his later work *No Name in the Street* focuses more on protest and black America. While Baldwin’s language does shift in his later novels, a strain of Black Nationalism can be found throughout all of Baldwin’s works, from his earliest works to his final novels. Similarly, Baldwin’s entreaties of interconnectedness and understanding continue into his later works, even those written at the very end of his life. Baldwin emphasizes different arguments in different texts, but his writing does not exclusively follow this evolutionary trajectory.

In addition to talking about the “interconnected destinies of black and white America,” Baldwin challenges the very distinction between black and white. He also challenges other binary identity categories, primarily gay/straight and man/woman. These challenges to identity labels, however, are at odds with Black Nationalism, which inherently depends upon these identity distinctions since it is invested in a distinct black identity from whiteness. This thesis is concerned with how Baldwin negotiates his way between these two contrary arguments—investment in identity categories while also queering them—in his fiction. I will come back to this in a moment.

Even though Baldwin utilizes aspects of Black Nationalism in his works, his relationship with Black Nationalism and writers of the Black Arts Movement was complicated. James Baldwin has often been pitted against the Black Arts Movement, which portrayed Baldwin as an African American writer writing within the white establishment, his prose obscured by a “perfumed smoke screen” (Clever 100). After all, Baldwin cites Henry James as his favorite and most influential novelist.<sup>2</sup> As a young writer, Baldwin faced criticism from the older African American writers for not being political enough as well. Langston Hughes criticized Baldwin’s

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<sup>2</sup> Baldwin even begins *Another Country* with a Henry James epigraph and refers to James in his nonfiction.

style, claiming that Baldwin “overwrites and over-poeticizes in images way over the heads of the folks supposedly thinking them” (quoted in Rampersad 2:205). Hughes saw Baldwin’s characters as not authentically black because of the lack of vernacular in dialogue and narrative descriptions. Not until Baldwin’s final novels did he make greater use of the vernacular and slang. Hughes was disappointed not just in the characterizations in his novels but in Baldwin as an author overall. According to Hughes’ biographer Arnold Rampersad, Hughes felt, “Paying a stiff price for the modicum of integration allowed them, young blacks were abandoning the old values and practices in the rush to be like whites” (1:335). Despite resistance from older writers like Hughes, Baldwin had a period of great success in the late 1950s into the early 1960s. After the release of *Another Country*, though, Baldwin’s popularity began falling, and he began facing hostility from the young up-and-coming writers of the Black Arts Movement—writers who had been greatly influenced by his earlier essays in *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time* but did not like the new direction of his work. Again, Baldwin was accused of not being political enough—or of holding political views that were not radical enough.

Black Arts writers were concerned with creating art that served political ends, art “pressed into the service of the revolution,” in the words of Sandra Flowers (46). Their writings often focus on telling a black history, on creating/reclaiming a black world and culture distinct from white America, and on pushing a strong political angle influenced by Pan-Africanism. Baldwin was not opposed to Black Nationalism, though he was critical of it. In a 1961 speech, Baldwin defined Black Nationalism as “a certain group of people, living in a certain place, [who] has decided to take its political destinies into its own hands. I don’t think it means anything more than that, and I know it does not mean anything less than that” (*The Cross of Redemption* 11). Baldwin supported the right of African Americans to self-determination yet did not see

separatism as the solution. Baldwin also resisted demonizing white people and resisted the virulent homophobia that characterized many Black Arts writers' works. Black Nationalism does not belong exclusively to the Black Arts Movement, and Baldwin was writing about Nationalism before the Black Arts Movement began. I speak largely to the Black Arts Movement in this thesis, however, as it was the most visible and influential Black Nationalist arts movement in Baldwin's later life, and the strife between Baldwin and Black Arts writers was well known.

The Black Arts Movement continued the development of a Black Aesthetic, an aesthetic drawing heavily from African art, music, history, religion, and culture. Many, if not most, Black Arts writings include references to jazz, particularly Coltrane and Charlie Bird Parker. Of all art forms, music—jazz, blues, gospel, soul—was seen as the most authentic black art. Other art forms were seen as suspect. As A.B. Spellman writes in “Not Just Whistling Dixie”:

European art forms have afforded the black artist useful media of expression, and all European forms, creative and performing, have been mastered to the point of excellent by at least a few black artists. However, all of the writings of Ellison, Jones, Baldwin, et al., all of the paintings of Lawrence, do not weigh as much as one John Coltrane solo in terms of the force of its thrust, the honesty of its statement, and in the originality of its form. The reason is that poem, play, novel and canvas are, for us, learned forms. (*Black Fire* 164)

Spellman goes on to refer to music as “a weapon of survival” for African Americans, particularly during slavery (165). Since the poem, play, novel, and canvas come from European cultures, Spellman argues that they do not truly belong to black artists in the same way music does and thus cannot truly communicate their experience in an unfiltered way. In order to achieve more authenticity in other art forms, artists in other mediums often imitated the freedom of jazz—more

specifically, 'new thing' jazz or 'free jazz,' the avant-garde stylings of Coltrane and Parker. As Spellman notes, many saw “Bird as much as a teacher of life, as of music” (159). This connection between life and music is also echoed in Baldwin’s works, most directly in his final novel *Just Above My Head*.

Because of its closer connection with music, poetry became the most popular form of literature in the Black Arts movement. Poetry provided space for formal experimentation and gave more freedom for emotional expression. Poetry was also important because it could be performed orally and visually rather than just written down, and performances were often accompanied by music. Smethurst summarizes:

...in some poets... the formal rhythms, emotions, gestures, and other elements of performative style were significantly rooted in gospel and the R&B vocal-group style that later became known as doo-wop as well as in new thing jazz. In other cases... a sort of bop sensibility predominated in which jagged rhythms and anaphoric fragments of sentences and phrases resembled the riffs of bop improvisation. (73)

Novels, a distinctly European art form, were a less common art form for artists in the Black Arts movement—excepting avant-garde novels such as those by Ishmael Reed. As a written form, the novel was seen to have less life and soul than oral and performative art. However, many of these techniques could still be employed in novels to draw links between music and African American experience and art. The Black Aesthetic plays an important role in Baldwin’s writings in terms of writing about black history, in terms of connecting to Africa (though he does not write about this uncritically), in terms of formal experimentation in his fiction, and most especially in terms of writing about and capturing musical expression. Music plays a role in all of his novels, and many

of his titles are derived from gospel music and old spirituals. The title of his fourth novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, is a direct reference to the blues district of Memphis, even though the novel is set in Harlem. The use of “Beale Street” establishes that the novel is meant to be another type of blues song. Musicians play important roles in both *Another Country* and *Just Above My Head* as well. Baldwin argues for the novel as another authentic black art through his choice of the novel form over poetry and through his heavily music-influenced style. See Chapter II for a longer discussion of this in *Just Above My Head*.

I have touched on the homophobia of Baldwin’s critics. The most homophobic responses to Baldwin’s novels came from writers in the Black Arts Movement. While not all Black Arts artists were homophobic, many of the most prolific writers were. The Black Arts movement was dominated by black men, and one prevailing theme is black masculinity. Homosexuality became a symbol of emasculation and of whiteness, and it was portrayed as a white disease. The most notorious homophobic attack on James Baldwin is that from Eldridge Cleaver in his collection of essays *Soul on Ice*. Cleaver begins his essay “Notes on a Native Son” claiming to have been a fan of Baldwin's earlier works. However, that “continuous delight one feels upon discovering a fascinating, brilliant talent on the scene” is short-lived (97). He critiques Baldwin’s “Princes and Powers” essay, taking Baldwin’s depiction of the black writers at the 1956 Conference of African-Negro Writers and Artists as representative of Baldwin's “self-hatred” and his “racial death-wish” (101). He also calls Baldwin's “first love... the white man” (99). In summarizing Baldwin's writing, Cleaver writes: “There is in James Baldwin's work the most grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time” (99).



Cleaver's argument displays a strong homophobia, a sentiment common to other writers in the Black Arts Movement as well. This can be seen in the anthology *Black Fire* (1968), which includes Reginald Lockett's poem "Die Black Pervert": "You sit there, sissified,/and brag about the/T/R/I/P/T/O/E/U/R/O/P/E..." (354). This trend towards describing homosexuality as a perversion—and a white perversion—can be seen in many other poems as well, like Welton Smith's "The Nigga Section" describing white people who "spread your gigantic ass from/one end of america to the other... and called all the beasts/to fuck you hard in the ass" (286). These whites who have murdered black men and committed other atrocities are described as "sodomites" and other epithets. Cleaver's accusations of Baldwin's obsession with the white man and Baldwin's frustration because he is "unable to have a baby by a white man" (102) are not totally out of line with other writers in this movement. Douglas Field also draws this connection between Black Nationalism and homophobia:

Although Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is careful to point out that black nationalism did not have a unique claim on homophobia, he rightly discusses the ways in which "national identity became sexualized in the 1960s, in such a way to engender a curious connection between homophobia and nationalism." (460)

The homophobic reception of Baldwin was not limited to the Black Arts Movement, and not all writers in the Black Arts Movement opposed Baldwin. But this reaction largely characterizes Baldwin's reception from the mid-1960s on. These homophobic critiques are also interesting in that they ignore another large set of possibilities; they always seem to imagine the black man in the "passive role" with the white man "on top," such as in Cleaver's comment about Baldwin wanting to "have a baby by a white man." If penetrating another man is meant to be a display of power, all of these critics fail to consider the power potential of a black man penetrating a white

man. Considering this possibility, however, would have meant reconsidering their argument entirely.

As several of these examples show, the homophobia of these writers also connects homosexuality to whiteness and a love of white culture. In criticizing Baldwin's love of "the white man," Cleaver also criticizes Baldwin's influence by white literary models and standards—maybe even Baldwin's choice of the novel as an art form. Earlier in his essay, Cleaver describes "the cover and camouflage of the perfumed smoke screen" of Baldwin's writing style (100), connecting it with the white literary establishment as opposed to the more authentic black voice in Black Arts literature. Only in his final two novels does Baldwin write extensively in the vernacular and write more experimentally while continuing to include elements of jazz.

Despite these criticisms from Black Arts writers and his general exclusion from the Black Arts canon even today, Baldwin incorporates elements of Black Nationalism into his works. This is most pronounced in his final three novels and his later essays, despite their presence in his earlier works as well. In both *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin even includes self-defined Black Nationalist radical characters, even though they are not the main characters of those works.

As already mentioned, another vital aspect of Black Nationalist writings is the strong role of politics in art. Capturing the writings of many other Black Arts writers, Houston A. Baker, Jr., says:

Along with other Black Aestheticians, I came to regard art as both a product and a producer in an unceasing struggle for black liberation. To be 'art,' the product had

to be expressivity or performance designed to free minds and bodies of a subjugated people. (13)

In order to liberate people, this art often included elements of a re-created or reconstructed history, Pan-Africanism, and calls to action. Black Arts texts often include references to socialism or, at least, criticisms of capitalism and colonialism. Baldwin, however, argues the direct opposite of Baker, stating that politics often get in the way of art.

In his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin critiques the Protest Novel tradition, particularly Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as oversimplifying complex situations and limiting what could be developed into more complex characters. Baldwin writes, “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (*The Price of the Ticket* 33). He sees the political impetus behind these novels as getting in the way of art. Real art, argues Baldwin, is not created purely with a political goal in mind.

Despite this opposition to protest literature, it is hard to read Baldwin's fifth novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a novel about a black man falsely accused of rape and about his girlfriend's attempt to get him a fair trial, as not being influenced by politics and the tradition of the protest novel. *Beale Street* reads as a castigation of corrupt police officers, of the corrupt legal system, and of the system's unfair treatment of African Americans. Baldwin's second play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, is based upon the murder of Emmett Till and dedicated to Medgar Evers' widow and children—another work with strong historical and political influences and goals. Marlon Ross goes as far as to say that Baldwin wrote in the protest tradition but was also

“constantly trying to write [himself] out of [it] in the early novels” (21). Despite attempts to always place art first, politics remain an important aspect of his fiction.

Baldwin's essays also are strongly driven by politics, primarily in speaking out about the African American experience in America. These political messages in his essays largely come from Baldwin's personal experiences. As a young man, Baldwin associated with those on the far political left, developing a “longer and closer relationship to Trotskyist and Socialist intellectuals” (Smethurst 47). He came out as a strong anti-Communist voice later on, though towards the end of his life he became a “Contributing Editor” to *Freedomways* “despite the close connection of much of the journal's staff to the CPUSA [the Communist Party USA]” (Smethurst 47-8). After several years in Paris, Baldwin returned to the United States in 1957 to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement, beginning with a tour through the American South. Baldwin met with Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; and Medgar Evers in the 1950s and 1960s and wrote several essays about his interactions with these men. Baldwin's involvement in the movement largely came through his writings and speaking engagements, though he was excluded from speaking at the 1963 March on Washington, either because of his homosexuality, his unpredictability, or both. As Martin Luther King Jr.'s message of nonviolence fell out of favor, so, too, did James Baldwin's message of “interconnectedness” as not being militant and radical enough. More people began dismissing Baldwin as a potential leader because of his homosexuality, and it became “common knowledge” that Baldwin was nicknamed “Martin Luther Queen” (Field 461). His involvement in the Civil Rights Movement was sometimes described as merely “symbolic” (Field 460, Muyumba 35), a perspective also influenced by the fact that Baldwin spent much of his time abroad rather than staying in the United States to take part in the Movement. As Black Power took hold in the mid- to late-1960s, Baldwin became

involved with SNCC and CORE as they became more militant, and Baldwin spoke out against the arrest of radical black activists, including Angela Davis. He also wrote against these arrests, like in “An Open Letter to Mr. Carter,” printed in the *New York Times* in 1977 and collected in *The Price of the Ticket* (637). It would be a mistake, though, to see this activism as isolated to James Baldwin’s later life.

Much as Baldwin operated both within and outside of the Black Arts Movement, he also wrote within and outside of the gay rights movement. Even though *Giovanni’s Room* became a foundational text of the gay and lesbian literature canon, Baldwin always insisted that the novel was not about homosexuality. Baldwin never identified himself as “gay” and claimed he did not understand the gay movement. According to Douglas Field, Baldwin told Richard Goldstein, “The word gay... has always rubbed me the wrong way. I never understood exactly what is meant by it” (13). Yet Baldwin wrote about queer sexuality years before the Stonewall Inn riots in 1969, predating the gay rights movement. Baldwin rarely discussed his own sexuality in his essays, even though queer sexuality plays a large role in five of his six novels. In fact, one of Baldwin’s early essays reads as homophobic. In “The Male Prison” (1954), Baldwin criticizes André Gide’s memoir *Madeleine* for speaking of Gide’s personal experiences with homosexuality: “And his homosexuality, I felt, was his own affair which he ought to have kept hidden from us, or, if he needed to be so explicit, he ought at least to have managed to be a little more scientific...” (*The Price of the Ticket* 102). Baldwin goes on to compare homosexuality to the Holocaust, arguing that questions of what is “natural” leads to a dead end in both discussions. Some of the more surprising excerpts come from Baldwin’s critiques of homosexuality in general rather than comments directed specifically at Gide:

The really horrible thing about the phenomenon of present-day homosexuality, the horrible thing which lies curled like a worm at the heart of Gide's trouble and his work... is that today's *unlucky deviate* can only save himself by the most tremendous exertion of all his forces from falling in to an underworld in which he never meets either men or women, where it is impossible to have either a lover or a friend, where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased. (104, emphasis added)

Later, he reaffirms a heterosexual, or at least a bisexual, framework: "It is one of the facts of life that there are two sexes... For, no matter what demons drive them, men cannot live without women and women cannot live without men..." (104). However, several years before Baldwin wrote this rant against Gide, he wrote and published an article titled "Preservation of Innocence" in a Moroccan journal, *Zero*, in 1949. The article argued for the naturalness of homosexuality and its prevalence in the natural world and also argued for the existence of a violently homophobic reaction in men who fear their own homosexual feelings—an effect later coined "homosexual panic" by Eve Sedgwick. Perhaps this shift—from saying that homosexuality is "natural" to declaring that it does not matter what is "natural"—is due to some change in Baldwin's life in which he nearly fell into this "underworld." During his life, Baldwin attempted suicide four times, so he was no stranger to depression. Baldwin takes his own advice to Gide on keeping his own sexuality as "his own affair," resisting writing about his own sexual experiences until the late essay "Here Be Dragons," the closing essay of *The Price of the Ticket* published in 1985.

While Baldwin sometimes voiced animosity towards the gay rights movement and the sexual revolution at large—which he declared neither "sexual" nor a "revolution" in "Here Be

Dragons” (*The Price of the Ticket* 688)—his writings on sexuality are undeniably *queer*.

Baldwin’s heroes in his novels tend to be bisexual in behavior, having sex with both men and women. His male characters’ self-professed sexual identities often do not match their behaviors, as homosexual men sleep with women, heterosexual men sleep with men, and many characters never label themselves or their behaviors.

In his novels, Baldwin queers not just sexuality but also queers gender and race, obliterating all identity labels simultaneously. Robert Corber credits this crossing of boundaries as part of what pushed away audiences from Baldwin’s books in the time in which Baldwin was writing. Corber says, “His insistence on the tangled relations among race, class, gender, and sexuality challenged the organization of identity in cold war America, an organization that depended on the binary oppositions white/black, male/female, and straight/gay” (169). For Baldwin, these various identities depend upon and are constituted through one another. He argues that Americans need to “uncloset” sexual desire if they “hoped to unwarp their imaginations from the destructive bent of racism” (Ross 34). Baldwin saw homophobia and racism as connected systems of oppression, and the only way to overcome racism was also to address homophobia. This aspect of Baldwin’s writings anticipate Judith Butler’s conceptions of identity construction voiced in the 1999 introduction to *Gender Trouble*. In clarifying her intentions with *Gender Trouble* and addressing the debates that resulted after its publication, Butler says:

Many of these debates have centered on the status of “construction,” whether race is constructed in the same way as gender. My view is that no single account of construction will do, and that these categories always work as background for one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another.

Thus, the sexualization of racial gender norms calls to be read through multiple lenses at once, and the analysis surely illuminates the limits of gender as an exclusive category of analysis. (xvi-xvii)

Baldwin's novels depict the intersections of these identities, requiring "multiple lenses" in order to fully understand what he attempts to accomplish. Baldwin's novel *Another Country* is especially concerned with the "sexualization of racial gender norms" in the ways that it explores desires that crosses racial, gender, and the homosexual/heterosexual boundaries.

Baldwin's queering of boundaries, however, appears to run completely counter to his arguments stemming from Black Nationalism. Black Nationalism depends in its very definition on a solid category of "black" as distinct from "white"—and oftentimes depends on a strict binary of "masculine" and "feminine" as well. Judith Butler addresses a similar dilemma in her 1999 introduction to *Gender Trouble*. *Gender Trouble* dedicates itself to obliterating categories of gender, of biological sex, and of the boundaries of the body. However, Butler also notes that, even though gender is socially constructed, gender categories still have very real impacts in people's lives. In her introduction, she discusses how identity labels can be strategically deployed in political battles for civil rights. Butler writes:

Even as I think that gaining recognition for one's status as a sexual minority is a difficult task within reigning discourses of law, politics, and language, I continue to consider it a necessity for survival. The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politization always remain threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes. That is no reason not to use, and be used, by identity. There is no political position purified of power, and



perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes. (xxvii-xxviii)

Even though LGBT identity labels can be used to discriminate against LGBT people, they can also operate as tools for gaining rights and recognition. Similarly, Baldwin attempts to denaturalize whiteness and a black/white racial boundary in his writings, but he also recognizes black identity as a social construction that has led to much discrimination and abuse in his life. He then deploys that identity and his experiences as a black man in order to fight for “survival.”

This thesis will explore the ways that Baldwin navigates these two threads of arguments. In the first chapter, I examine one of Baldwin’s earlier works, *Another Country* (1962), in terms of passing and of the breaking down of various binary identity categories. *Another Country* is Baldwin’s best-selling novel and has received more critical attention than Baldwin’s later novels that are explored in this thesis. *Another Country* falls into Baldwin’s earlier writings in which he pushes for reconciliation across various divides through the act of love. More recent scholarship on this novel has focused on how the novel operates to explode categories of identities. In addition to examining the destruction of identities the characters experience, I also will look at how Black Nationalism has influenced the novel in terms of Baldwin’s strategic deployment of black identity.

In discussing passing and the construction of identity in *Another Country*, I utilize Althusser’s concept of interpellation. In *On Ideology*, Althusser argues that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects” (47). This is accomplished through Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs): cultural, educational, legal, political, and familial ISAs (17). Identity categories are created by these ISAs, and internalizing how others and these ISAs perceive a person leads to one identifying with a particular label. Althusser writes:

I shall suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (48)

Interpellation occurs when someone hears “Hey, you there!” and responds with thinking, that person must mean me. These identity categories are constructed and imposed upon people through day-to-day interactions. As Althusser states, “what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology” (49). These everyday interactions are a part of these larger ISAs, whether they take place in the family, through media, or in a school setting. Queer theorists have adapted Althusser’s understanding of ideology and interpellation to examine the ideology of heteronormativity, taking it from a strictly Marxist economic critique to a cultural critique of sexual politics and identity. In his essay “Some Queer Notions about Race,” writer Samuel Delaney writes about how interpellation applies to gay identity: “[A]nyone who self-identifies as gay must have been interpellated, at some point, as gay by some individual or social speech or text to which he or she responded, ‘He/she/it/they must mean me’” (216). Without interpellation, there would be no such thing as a gay identity, and no one would claim “gay” as a label by which to identify him- or herself. This chapter focuses on these day-to-day interactions that coalesce into these larger scale identity constructions, specifically regarding constructions of race and sexuality.

The second chapter of my thesis focuses on Baldwin’s later works, primarily his final and longest novel *Just Above My Head* (1978). Little scholarship has focused on this novel until

recently. What has been written tends to focus on the depiction of black masculinity and the church. In addition to addressing the Black Nationalist aspects of Baldwin's later works, I will also explore how Baldwin continues to tear down various binary identity categories in his writings. Even though there is no singular event like that experienced by Vivaldo in *Another Country* with "the leap and the rending and the terror and the surrender" as identities collapse upon one another (255), Baldwin continues to push against identity categories to create more possibilities for gender and sexual expression and for racialized identity and experience. This thesis will show how Baldwin utilizes these two opposing threads of argument to navigate the reader through the complexities of identity politics.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “NOT AT ALL A SECRET”: PASSING IN JAMES BALDWIN’S *ANOTHER COUNTRY*

From the nineteenth into the early twentieth century, the genre of the passing narrative has centered on the racial passing story, particularly on the story of the “tragic mulatto” woman. In more recent years, the concept of passing has widened to include gender, sexuality, and class. In *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*, Mattilda A.K.A. Matt Bernstein Sycamore argues for broadening the term “passing” to include “the ‘right’ gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, body type, health status, ethnicity... religion, political party, social/educational institution...” and more (8-9).

As the term “passing” suggests, the boundaries between identity categories are permeable. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Jack Halberstam defines passing “as a narrative [that] assumes that there is a self that masquerades as another kind of self and does so successfully; at various moments, the successful pass may cohere into something akin to identity. At such a moment, the passer has *become*” (21). Not only does one *pretend* to be something else; one can *become* something else through others’ perceptions. In fact, it is precisely this moving across boundaries that destabilizes these identity categories. As Linda Schlossberg says in *Passing*, “[T]he passing subject's ability to transcend or abandon his or her ‘authentic’ identity calls into question the very notion of authenticity itself” (2). Characters in James Baldwin's *Another Country* cross borders, calling into question what it means to be gay or straight, a lover or a

whore, a success or a failure, stable or mentally ill. The authenticity of these categorical definitions is also called into question in that characters often don't know what they are in the first place, which makes it difficult to judge whether or not their “masquerades” are “successful.” In this paper, I will use this broader definition of passing to look at various types of normality and how the characters in James Baldwin's *Another Country*—particularly Rufus, Eric, and Vivaldo—deconstruct these categories. By destabilizing these identity categories, *Another Country* deconstructs the concept of the passing narrative.

*Another Country* takes place mostly in Greenwich Village in New York City. The novel follows an interracial group of acquaintances—and sometimes friends—as they navigate interracial relationships and different kinds of sexual experiences and as they pursue careers as artists. The novel is told in third person limited point of view, shifting from one character to another within chapters. The main characters consist of Rufus, a black jazz drummer who commits suicide early in the novel; Vivaldo, an Italian aspiring writer and Rufus's best friend; Ida, Rufus's sister who becomes Vivaldo's girlfriend; Eric, a white man from Alabama who has been in Paris for a few years working as an actor; Leona, a Southern white woman who has come to New York City to start a new life and begins dating Rufus; Richard, a white aspiring writer who publishes his first novel to great financial success; and Cass, Richard's wife who feels shut out by Richard's success. Despite Rufus's early suicide in the novel, his presence and influence on the other characters continues throughout. Even though the characters come from a variety of backgrounds, their struggles are the same: attempting to learn who they are and searching for love.

Scholarship on *Another Country* has often focused on whether or not the text is homophobic or racist, or has focused on the role of Black Nationalism in the novel. Other scholarship focuses on Rufus's suicide and his lasting influence over the other characters.

However, viewing *Another Country* in terms of passing reveals the larger identity struggles at play as characters attempt to maintain a semblance of normality in the eyes of others and also for themselves. Rather than being about blackness or gayness, the novel questions identity categories and self-definition as a whole.

Some critical work has made the way for my line of inquiry, particularly around identity and the breaking down of binaries. Susan Feldman and William Cohen both look at how the novel complicates identity, particularly around the notions of gay and straight. Kevin Ohi investigates the role of secrets in the characters' lives, though he focuses mainly on trauma and the crafting of a queer utopian future. James A. Dievler in "Sexual Exiles" most closely approaches what I am doing in this paper when he argues that Baldwin is "advocating a postcategorical, poststructural concept of sexuality that we might call 'postsexuality'" (163). However, by examining the novel in terms of passing and the effects of interpellation, it is possible to see a wider implication of the deconstruction of sexuality, race, and gender. My analysis will refer to Dievler, Feldman, and Cohen and take that further in looking at how *Another Country* sheds light on the passing narrative as a genre and on the notion of identities beyond Baldwin's novel.

I first want to examine the role of Black Nationalism in the novel, as this seems diametrically opposed to the argument I am making about how the novel queers identity. *Another Country*, published in 1962, pre-dates the advent of the Black Arts Movement and Black Power by about four years. However, as Robert Scott argues, "*Another Country* shows the honing of a special language and ideology from which the thrust for black power has developed" (25). Many of the characteristics of Black Arts Movement writings appear in *Another Country*, particularly an investment in black identity, elements of separatism, and anger—particularly at white

characters. Rufus and his sister Ida, the two black main characters of the novel, embody these characteristics. Others are embedded in the novel itself, such as the connection with black music and a violent landscape. Even though Baldwin includes these aspects in his novel, they are not the ending place in the characters' understandings of identity and politics.

As in Baldwin's other works, *Another Country* reflects an investment in black culture, especially in black music. Music is constantly referenced as background music to parties, conversations, and sexual experiences—especially records of Bessie Smith. Rufus works as a drummer in a jazz band until he begins dating Leona and his life falls apart. His sister, Ida, later begins performing as a jazz singer, carrying on Rufus's musical legacy. Much as in *Just Above My Head*, discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, music becomes a metaphor for all of black experience:

It was to remember the beat: *A nigger*, said his [Rufus's] father, *lives his whole life, lives and dies according to a beat. Shit, he humps to that beat and the baby he throws up in there, well, he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddamn tambourine.* The beat: hands, feet, tambourines, drums, pianos, laughter, curses, razor blades... The beat—in Harlem in the summertime one could almost see it, shaking above the pavements and the roof. (12)

“The beat” continues in the background of the novel, occasionally coming to the forefront as Ida and Rufus take the stage. Rufus also ties this black musical experience to violence with the inclusion of razor blades in this list. Violence and overly sexualized images fill the first section of the novel that focuses on Rufus. However, the juxtaposition of razor blades and curses with laughter and babies creates a complicated picture. I will return to the violence in a moment.

An Afro-centric reclaiming of black history and identity also appears in multiple references to Ida as an African queen. For example, when Rufus looks at his sister after giving her a shawl he bought for her in India, he thinks, “Ages and ages ago, Ida had not been merely the descendant of slaves. Watching her dark face in the sunlight... it could be seen that she had once been a monarch” (12). Other characters, including white characters, see royalty in Ida as well. For example, when Eric first meets her, he describes her as “wearing all her beauty as a great queen wears her robes” and describes her hair “swept back from her forehead, piled high, and gleaming, like a crown” (213, 211). What makes Ida so remarkable and so beautiful is precisely her African-ness—her dark skin and her style of dress. Descriptions of Ida foreshadow a Black is Beautiful aesthetic of Black Power and align her with not just other African Americans but also with Africa.

Baldwin reinforces this distinct black identity by placing it in opposition to whiteness. Whiteness is characterized by innocence, childishness, and ignorance. Whiteness also becomes the target of Rufus and Ida’s anger. Ida especially categorizes all white people as being the same and as never being able to understand black experience. When fighting with Vivaldo, she tells him, “Oh, All you white boys make me sick” (234). Just a short while later, she says, “You meant exactly what I thought you meant. And you know why? Because you can’t help it, that’s why. Can’t none of you white boys help it” (237). This lumping together of Vivaldo with all other white boys reinscribes the barrier between the Vivaldo and Ida, holding them at a distance from each other and preventing them from finding love together. It also denies Vivaldo his own individuality, always reducing him to the role of ignorant white boy. Both Rufus and Ida keep these barriers up as a matter of self-defense. In letting Vivaldo get too close, both risk allowing Vivaldo enough power to do them psychic harm. As Rufus notes of Vivaldo, “Vivaldo was like



everyone else that he knew in that they, all the others could only astonish him by kindness or fidelity; it was only Vivaldo who had the power to astonish him by treachery” (36). Keeping the roles of these white people minimized in their lives operates as a kind of damage control. The drawing of definitive lines between black and white and telling white people they will never understand black experiences defines an essentialist argument about race seen in Black Arts writings.

Ida and Rufus also use their blackness in order to lash out at and hold power over sympathetic white characters in the novel. Any time that one of the white characters makes him- or herself vulnerable, Rufus or Ida take aim. In his sexual relationship with Eric, Rufus degrades Eric in every way he knows how, primarily by challenging Eric’s masculinity: “He had despised Eric’s manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity” (44). Rufus does the same with Leona, using “her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most” (50) and calling her “a funny little cracker” (25). Rufus targets both Eric and Leona because they are white *Southerners*, not just because of their race. Though he knows Vivaldo is his best friend, Rufus still thinks of Vivaldo as a “liberal white bastard” (26) and even calls him such. As Robert Scott points out, “Ida, who replaces her brother in making the black-white differences cut the liberal white bastards, (in this case mainly Vivaldo and Cass) tells Cass several times that there are dues to be paid” (32). Both Ida and Rufus take out their rage at white America as a whole on those white people who are closest to them. These moments reverse their everyday experiences with racism from whites, provide a small amount of revenge for their daily suffering, and remind the white characters of the privileges they hold. This urge for revenge and making white people pay for

their whiteness parallels similar anger voiced in Black Arts poetry, like that collected in *Black Fire* and in the works of Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed.

Both Rufus and Ida are confronted with situations in which these divisions between black and white experience get blurred, despite their attempts to hold them firm. The first night Rufus and Leona sleep together, Rufus tries to hold her at a distance; he prefers to only see her as a white “girl” and to not see her as a full human being: “Something touched his imagination for a moment, suggesting that Leona was a person and had her story and that all stories were trouble. But he shook the suggestion off. He wouldn’t be around long enough to be bugged by her story” (17). He struggles with this again later in the night, acknowledging that he “wanted to hear her story. And he wanted to know nothing more about her” (25). While black characters are reluctant to see white characters as human, white characters attempt to erase racial differences, refusing to see how they are still a part of the racist system or to see how they still hold privilege. Vivaldo and Cass both attempt to portray themselves as exceptional white people who are not like the rest, but Rufus and Ida repeatedly tell them they are just the same.<sup>3</sup>

Anger becomes a defining characteristic for both Rufus and Ida, and this is often directed towards white people. Ida’s greatest rage is directed towards Leona, who Ida blames for Rufus’s death and calls “that damn crazy little cracker bitch” (90). This anger, however, has many sources: disapproving looks from people on the street, verbal harassment (especially of Rufus and Leona while out in public as an interracial couple), and from harassment by police officers. The anger leads to violence, such as Rufus’s repeated physical abuse of Leona, Rufus’s threats against Vivaldo including coming at him with a knife, and Ida’s violent language. The violence becomes something that Rufus does not just express but also sees all around him in the world,

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<sup>3</sup> When Vivaldo tells Rufus, “Well... I’m different,” Rufus answers, “Yeah... I bet you are” (64).

such as when he looks at the walls of a bar bathroom: “He looked at the horrible history splashed furiously on the walls—telephone numbers, cocks, breasts, balls, cunts, etched into these walls with hatred. *Suck my cock. I like to get whipped. I want a hot stiff prick up my ass. Down with Jews. Kill the niggers. I suck cocks*” (74). Rufus’s life ends in an act of violence as he commits suicide by jumping off of the Washington Bridge. The anger and violence are similar to the violence that appears in the Black Arts Movement years later.

Rufus also expresses homophobia, despite his own sexual attractions to (white) men. He repeatedly uses the insult “cock sucker,” and always uses it in relation to white people. When Rufus talks about white people in general, he says to Vivaldo, “How I hate them—all those white sons of bitches out there. They’re trying to kill me, you think I don’t know? They got the world on a string, man, *the miserable white cock suckers*, and they tying that string around my neck, they killing *me*” (62—emphasis added). Rufus also critiques white women in a homophobic way, referring to Vivaldo’s girlfriend Jane as dressing “like a goddamn bulldagger” (32). This association of whiteness with homosexuality, and using “cock sucker” as an insult directed at white people, parallels its later use in Black Arts writings. *Another Country* also somewhat perpetuates this association, as there are no sexual encounters between black men in the novel—all homosexual encounters involve at least one white man, if not both men. In fact, Baldwin does not portray two black men together until his fourth novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, in 1968.

Despite these connections with the language and content of Black Arts writings, Baldwin pushes back against these divisions between black and white—namely through interracial desire and through love. Because Rufus is unable to move beyond these divisions and see beyond Leona’s whiteness and his own blackness, he takes his own life. Ida, however, is able to move

beyond this binary of black and white at the end of the novel and to finally experience love with Vivaldo, even if it only lasts a limited time. Baldwin shows these Black Nationalist investments in identity as something grounded in the experiences of these characters, but he does not see these identifications as necessarily productive or as the answer to the discrimination faced by African Americans. Instead, the novel works to shatter these boundaries between black and white, homosexual and heterosexual, man and woman. In this way, the novel moves against Black Nationalist ideals. As Stefanie Dunning explains, “interracial same-sex eroticism is figured... in opposition to Black Nationalist discourse” (95). Black Nationalism concerns itself with perpetuating heterosexuality, masculinity, and blackness through avoidance of interracial relationships and homosexual relationships—particularly those that are both. In perpetuating heterosexuality, masculinity, and blackness, Black Nationalism maintains strong boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual, masculine and feminine, black and white. And according to film director Isaac Julien, desire is key in holding up these boundaries because “desire is always the axis along which different forms of cultural policing takes place” (quoted in Ongiri 280). Baldwin explores these forbidden desires to challenge racial, sexual, and gender boundaries. The novel undermines the policing of identities and shows that, in fact, there are no authentic identities—not for these characters nor in American society at large. Heterosexual, masculine, and black become meaningless markers.

Traditional constructions of racial passing do not appear in *Another Country*, as both Rufus and Ida are definitively perceived as black. Baldwin does challenge constructions of whiteness, however, in his portrayal of ethnic white characters. Vivaldo is described as an Italian, not as white, and Richard is described as Polish. Even the whiteness of other characters is qualified: Cass is described as “plain old American stock” from New England (36), and Eric and

Leona are qualified as Southern. The most direct reference to racial passing Baldwin makes is concerning the Italians in Greenwich Village who are struggling to pass as white: “The Italians, after all, merely wished to be accepted as decent Americans and probably could not be blamed for feeling that they might have had an easier time of it if they had not been afflicted with so many Jews and junkies and drunkards and queers and spades” (251). This breaking down of whiteness from one monolithic category is something Baldwin does in *Giovanni’s Room* and continues to do in his later works as well. Rather than focus on black characters who pass as white, Baldwin challenges the meaning of blackness and whiteness and the ability to both recognize and look beyond these labels to connect with human beings. Instead of depicting them attempting to pass as white, *Another Country* depicts characters attempting to pass as straight, as successful, and as people in possession of knowledge of who they are.

The way others perceive him constantly preoccupies Rufus, and these impressions of others interpellate him alternately as a black man (with many different connotations), as a failure, as a man who will have sex with men, and as a hustler. At the beginning of the novel, Rufus is aware he no longer passes as normal. One example of the interpellation of Rufus as a failure occurs outside of a bar, as he debates whether or not he should enter:

He wanted to go in and use the bathroom but he was ashamed of the way he looked. He had been in hiding, really, for nearly a month. And he saw himself now, in his mind's eye, shambling through this crowd to the bathroom and crawling out again while everyone watched him with pitying or scornful or mocking eyes. (10)

His primary reason for not entering is his fear of no longer being able to pass for normal. Standing outside of the bar, he remembers “when he had been inside”—when he passed as a part

of the culture (11). Rufus's imaginings of being interpellated by the people in the bar is enough to keep him out.

Leona and Rufus are also repeatedly interpellated as an interracial—and thus unacceptable—couple white out in public. Rufus observes how people perceive them: “Without Vivaldo, there was a difference in the eyes which watched them. Villagers, both bound and free, looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm” (30-31). Shortly after Rufus thinks this, “he raised his eyes and met the eyes of an Italian adolescent... The boy looked at him with hatred; his glance flicked over Leona as though she were a whore; he dropped his eyes slowly and swaggered on...” (31). The reaction of the “Italian adolescent” is just one example of the widespread rejection Rufus repeatedly feels occurring around him, and though it makes him angry, he also internalizes shame. The persistent interpellation of Rufus as a hated outsider and a failure contributes to his psychological distress.

Interpellation does not always lead to Rufus feeling shame; in his first sexual experience with Leona, Rufus also imagines others watching. The scene begins with Rufus imagining that he is watching himself, as he also does outside of the bar. While Rufus and Leona are having sex, “...nothing could have stopped him, not the white God himself nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs” (24). From his first move to pin Leona until he orgasms, he imagines himself as the black rapist degrading the white Southern woman, and he imagines other people perceiving him as such. Through this imagined interpellation, Rufus becomes powerful. However, it seems that these moments of imagined interpellation with Leona are the only times Rufus feels empowered by the gaze of others. He continues abusing Leona, presumably to retain

that powerful feeling instead of feeling rejection. Only later, after Leona is institutionalized, does the opinion of others of Rufus as an abuser bring him guilt and shame.

Not only are they interpellated as a couple; Rufus and Leona also interpellate each other.

According to James Dievler:

Rufus is violently reacting to racist history and not exactly ‘making love’ ...

Leona, in contrast, once their relationship is underway, treats Rufus with the surface pity and charity that is akin to the stereotypical way in which white liberals are viewed as treating blacks... Rufus and Leona are doomed because they see each other as the world sees them. (173-4)

In pitying him, Leona makes Rufus more pitiable. By dismissing Leona as a “white liberal,” Rufus creates more distance. This heightens the strain on their relationship, making maintaining it impossible. Interpellation helps lead to their destruction of each other.

Rufus's motivation to hide from friends and family is the result of his conviction that he will never pass as normal and healthy. He knows he is sick and has “come to nothing,” and he does not want his friends or family to see him that way (30). Similarly, he knows most of them blame him for what has happened to Leona, and he does not want to absorb the blame they project upon him. As soon as Vivaldo sees Rufus again, Rufus recognizes his own failure in Vivaldo's reaction: “Vivaldo's face told him how he looked. He moved away from the door, away from Vivaldo's scrutiny” (44). He fears responses by friends because he knows he will interpellate their responses, leaving Rufus feeling even worse about himself.

Rufus is disturbed not just by this interpellation of him as a failure but also by how others perceive his sexual orientation. While Rufus and others around him seem to think of him as straight, Rufus has a brief physical relationship with Eric—a relationship that serves as an “open

secret,” in the words of Eve Sedgwick. Most everyone around him—including Vivaldo, Cass, and Ida—know about the relationship, but no one openly acknowledges it. The knowledge that Rufus is having sex with a man does not challenge his friends' belief that Rufus is straight. However, johns are always able to pick Rufus out on the street and proposition him—subtly or less so—for sex. This ability to be picked out as a man who will have sex with men distresses Rufus, especially because he occasionally desires those men. Rufus lacks the ability to reconcile his hypermasculinity—evident in his abuse of Leona, in his homophobic abuse of Eric, and in his quick anger at the world—with his sexual attraction to men, particularly to white men.

A final moment of interpellation pushes Rufus too far. After spending the night out with Vivaldo, Cass, and Richard, Rufus heads towards the Y with the money Cass gave him to pay for a room. Just after passing where Eric used to live,

Two girls and two boys, white, stood on the opposite corner, waiting for the lights to change... Then there was someone at his shoulder, a young white boy in a vaguely military cap and a black leather jacket. He looked at Rufus with the greatest hostility, then started slowly down the Avenue away from him, waving his rump like a flag. He looked back, stopped beneath the marquee of a movie theater. The lights changed. Rufus and the two couples started toward each other, came abreast in the middle of the Avenue, passing—only, one of the girls looked at him with a kind of pitying wonder in her eyes. *All right, bitch*. He started toward Eighth Street, for no reason; he was simply putting off his subway ride.

(75)

While the “pitying wonder” of the girl seems to be what pushes Rufus over the edge, the come on by the young boy in the leather jacket certainly contributes to it. This reading of Rufus as a



man who sleeps with men stays with Rufus, and the last hour of his life is full of hyper-sexualized perceptions of the world around him. Rufus boards a train, and a white man stands next to Rufus, the “proximity of white buttock to black knee” causing Rufus to feel “his gorge rise” (77). The train then rushes “into the blackness with a phallic abandon, into the blackness which opened to receive it, opened, opened, the whole world shook with their coupling” (77). All of this makes it clear that Rufus’s sexual relationship with Eric was not merely a fluke, and his peddling was more than merely a way to eat. Rufus sexually desires men, particularly white men, but he cannot accept this desire. As he stands on the edge of the Washington Bridge preparing to jump, Rufus remembers Eric and thinks, “*I can’t make it this way*” (78). “Making it” applies just as much to facing his homosexual, interracial desires as to his past abuse of Leona and his professional failure.

Rufus’s sexual desire cannot be separated from his racial difference, as all of these instances involve white men. Racial difference also influences Rufus’s relationship with Leona. She initially attracts Rufus because she is white and from the South, and Rufus acknowledges that his family, particularly Ida, will disapprove of their relationship: “You’d never even have looked at that girl, Rufus,” he imagines Ida would say, “if she’d been black. But you’ll pick up any white trash because she’s white” (29). Rufus grows uncomfortable at the thought, as he recognizes that there is probably some truth in that. Rufus’s sexual attractions support Judith Butler’s argument that racial difference and sexual difference “cannot be constituted save through the other” (123). Vivaldo’s attraction to Ida—and to black prostitutes—is similarly deeply entangled in matters of racial difference. This difference ties into passing, as there is still a strong social taboo in the early 1960s—and today—against interracial relationships. Just as his relationship with Leona was seen as abnormal, an interracial same-sex relationship would have

been much more difficult to carry on except in total secrecy. Both Butler and Siobhan B. Somerville draw strong ties between the taboos on homosexuality and miscegenation, which converge “at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure reproduction” (Butler 123). For Rufus, race and gender are vital to how he understands and/or denies his sexuality, and these cannot be separated.

Rufus’s ultimate failure is not that of a gay man attempting to pass as straight, as his relationship with Leona demonstrates. Rufus’s failure is in his inability to accept desires that move outside of a gay/straight, black/white binary. Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” helps to explain Rufus’s loss of self near the end of his life. According to Bersani, “Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self” (222). Bersani proposes that, through homosexual sex, identity and “identification with a murderous judgment against him” can be demolished (222). The crisis for Rufus is that he is unable to get away from this murderous judgment. As he starts to lose his sense of self, he clings to these binaries and cannot let go of their meanings. Because of this clinging, he is reminded over and over of society’s judgments regarding his sexual behavior. Critics suggest the difference for Rufus from characters like Eric and Vivaldo is his blackness—being both black and queer is too “other,” too many levels of identity and repression to overcome. Rather than experience a metaphorical death of self identity, Rufus undergoes a literal death. Eric and Vivaldo are able to move beyond identity as portrayed by Bersani in a way that Rufus is not, which will be further explored later in this paper.

Rufus and other characters struggle with several other binaries beyond heterosexual/homosexual. One of the primary binaries already touched upon in Rufus’s life is success/failure. Rufus sees his shift from being perceived as successful to being perceived as a

failure as something that can occur to anyone at any time. Before the novel begins, Rufus is a successful, well-respected musician expected to “do great things” (69). But even though he is successful, Rufus recognizes that there is “something frightening about the aspect of old friends, old lovers, who had, mysteriously, come to nothing” (30). As soon as he begins his relationship with Leona, he puts off going back to work until he is afraid to go back. This is mostly caused by his obsession with others’ perceptions and with the rejection he experiences because of his interracial relationship with Leona. After his “fall,” he sees how easy it is for this to happen to other people as well:

Entirely alone, and dying of it, he was part of an unprecedented multitude. There were boys and girls drinking coffee at the drugstore counters who were held back from his condition by barriers as perishable as their dwindling cigarettes. They could scarcely bear their knowledge, nor could they have borne the sight of Rufus... (10)

The line between success and failure is very thin, as far as Rufus is concerned—a line that anyone can cross more easily than he or she thinks. While Rufus still draws a narrow, shaky distinction between success and failure, other characters later in the novel further blur and destabilize these categories. The prime example of this is Richard, a writer/teacher who finally completes a novel and finds financial success. Meanwhile, both Richard and Cass think the novel is actually not very good, and Cass’s unspoken judgment eats at Richard. Richard feels like a failure despite passing as a success, and he later admits to Cass that he is jealous of Vivaldo for his youth and because he still possesses the potential to be great. Not only is the division permeable; characters are able to inhabit both spaces, or neither space, simultaneously.

Another prominent binary is that of whore/lover. I would be remiss in neglecting to mention the flatness of the female characters in *Another Country*. Ida, Leona, and Cass are not afforded nearly the same complexity as the men—especially in terms of their sexuality. These women, as well as the prostitutes and other women briefly mentioned, are often simplified into either being faithful or being a whore—and all of them are accused of being a whore at some point. For Leona, these accusations come from people like the “Italian adolescent” on the street for being with a black man. However, the accusation also comes from Rufus who claims she has been “sleeping with other colored boys behind his back” as an excuse to beat her (51). While Leona is the most faithful of our female characters, she is also the one most often called a whore. When Cass admits she has been sleeping with Eric, Richard treats her like a whore as well: “Did he fuck you in the ass, did he make you suck his cock? Answer me, you bitch, you slut, you cunt!” (316). Yet Eric still sees Cass untarnished, telling her, “You’ve been my lover and now you’ll be my friend” (342). Ida complicates the lover/whore binary even further when she tells Vivaldo about how white men always look at her like she is a whore (352) and admits to feeling like a whore for sleeping with Ellis (357). In her last night with Ellis, Ida’s perception of herself as a whore is also strongly influenced by the bassist of the band with whom she performs whispering to her, “You black white man’s whore, don’t you never let me catch you on Seventh Avenue, you hear? I’ll tear your little black pussy up...” (357). Ida, as the other women in *Another Country*, allows others’ perceptions of her as a whore to influence her impression of herself. Yet before admitting the affair to Vivaldo, she tells him she loves him for the first time. Even after she finishes revealing her secrets and her affair with Ellis, Vivaldo manages to tell her that he loves her, too—but not before thinking “She, too, was a whore; how bitterly he had been betrayed!” (361). In telling Vivaldo how she has felt like a whore, she strangely opens room for

both of them to express their love for each other. Through addressing the label “whore,” Ida positions herself to become a “lover” once again.

While the women are more often portrayed in these either/or situations—being either a lover or a whore—the male characters are more complicated. Yves, Eric’s French lover, works as a prostitute on the streets of Paris before meeting Eric. Eric is aware of Yves’ line of work, but this knowledge does not prevent him from taking Yves as his lover, then offering to bring Yves to the United States. For Eric, there is no contradiction between lover and whore, as Yves is both—just as Ida is to Vivaldo. Meanwhile, other male characters seem immune to the label “whore.” Rufus also begins working “peddling his ass” in exchange for food. However, this work does not earn him the label of whore, even though that is precisely what he is doing. Whereas Ida’s affair earns her the label of whore, Vivaldo’s night with Eric seems to have no such impact on his lover/whore status. Indeed, it is this night with Eric that enables Vivaldo to become a better lover. The distinction between who is a lover and who is a whore becomes blurred, especially when a person is both or when one leads to the other.

Another overarching binary is that of normal/abnormal. In several examples, the idea of what is truly “normal” is turned on its head. As Cass and Eric talk about Leona and her love for Rufus, Cass says, “To tell the truth, I think she probably loved Rufus, really loved him, and wanted Rufus to love her.” Eric responds by saying, “How abnormal... can you get!” (201). Truly being in love is so rare that it has become the abnormal, impossible state. All of the characters search for love and try to understand what “love” even means, feeling abnormal while actually experiencing a very normal condition.

A force working to maintain the integrity of these binaries and creating the potential for passing is the keeping of secrets. In any identity construction, there is always something left over

that does not easily fit into binary categories, and this excess manifests in the form of secrets. Characters constantly refer to secrets, the power of secrets, open secrets, and the role of confession. Secrets enable characters to pass as things that they are not—primarily as being faithful partners or as being straight instead of some degree of queer. However, the characters disagree on whether or not things are ever truly a secret—whether or not it is ever possible to pass.

Cass, for example, understands secrets to be a burden everyone must bear:

Perhaps such secrets, the secrets of everyone, were only expressed when the person laboriously dragged them into the light of the world, imposed them on the world, and made them a part of the world's experience. Without this effort, the secret place was merely a dungeon in which the person perished; without this effort, indeed, the entire world would be an uninhabitable darkness; and she saw, with a dreadful reluctance, why this effort was so rare. (98)

Cass's secret is her misery with Richard—a man whose artistic talent she no longer respects—and that she is a sensuous woman trapped in this non-romantic marriage. She finds an outlet for her desires in her affair with Eric, but then she must bear the weight of a new secret life. Once she tells Richard of the affair, she is distraught, yet she finally has the possibility of either making some kind of change or making peace with her situation. Cass's take on secrets resonates with Rufus's experience. Rufus's attraction to men, particularly white men, is more than he could carry. By the time the novel opens, his current state of living has also become a kind of secret, as none of his friends or family know where he is. Rufus eventually takes his own life because his mind has become an unbearable “dungeon” for his body. The logical implications of this metaphor, that secrets are an incredible burden, suggest that passing always comes with heavy

consequences. While attempting to maintain a façade of normality, a person exacerbates whatever it is that he or she is trying to hide until it cannot be hidden any longer. In this way, secrets in *Another Country* parallel Somerville's list of consequences that come with passing, namely "immense losses... great risks... and often betrayal" (83).

Whereas Cass has a fairly clear cut understanding about the nature of secrets, Eric gives a series of statements that create a much more complicated picture. In the contradictions that arise, the most interesting and insightful revelations regarding identity and passing emerge. Several times, Eric claims secrets are impossible, primarily concerning whether or not it is possible to hide one's homosexuality. "The trouble with a secret life," thinks Eric, "is that it is very frequently a secret from the person who lives it and not at all a secret for the people he encounters" (170). Eric believes he led this kind of secret life in his youth. He repeats this kind of sentiment later: "How could Eric have known that his fantasies, however unreadable they were for him, were inscribed in every one of his gestures, were betrayed in every inflection of his voice, and lived in his eyes with all the brilliance and beauty and terror of desire?" (170). Eric did not know what made him different from other people and did not fully understand his attraction to men, but everyone around him already knew what he was.

However, just a few sentences later, Eric doubles back in his thinking on secrets. In remembering cross dressing in his mother's clothes, Eric thinks, "But by this time he knew that everything he did was wrong in the eyes of his parents, and in the eyes of the world, and that, therefore, everything must be lived in secret" (170). This lends to Ohi's point about these secrets—that in *Another Country*, there are "constitutive secrets that refuse to reveal themselves, secrets that maintain the characters' and the novel's consistency not through self-revelation but through their exorbitant, recalcitrant, and inscrutable weight" (264). While the presence of

secrets is clear, the content is not always clear to the reader or, likely, to the character, either.

This “everything” that “must be lived in secret” is not defined, other than that it has something to do with Eric’s queerness. The same can be said of Cass’s secrets, as there seem to be more than just her unhappiness with Richard. Eric’s family and community probably did not know that he was cross dressing in his mother’s clothes, even though they sensed there was something queer about him. These two segments of Eric’s train of thought create a strange situation in which there are secrets known to the public but unknown to the individual while also secrets known to the individual and unknown to the public. The first excerpt implies that outside people know one better than one knows oneself. The second excerpt challenges that, stating that outside people do not know everything.

The former point of view returns several more times, notably when Eric thinks,

For the act of love is a confession. One lies about the body but the body doesn’t lie about itself; it cannot lie about the force which drives it. And Eric had discovered, inevitably, the truth about many men, who then wished to drive Eric and the truth together out of the world. (180-1)

In saying “the body doesn’t lie,” Eric implies that there exists an absolute truth about a person that can be read from the body, whether or not the person is aware of that truth. Yet such a statement is unstable because desires are constantly shifting in *Another Country*, from Eric’s surprised attraction to Cass to Vivaldo’s sudden interest in Eric. If “the body doesn’t lie,” it must be giving off different truths at different moments to different people.

An example that only some people can read certain “truths” is that Eric recognizes that not everyone can read same-sex desires emanating from the men from whom he can. In



considering these men who “wished to drive Eric and the truth together out of the world,” Eric thinks...

...of these men, that ignorant army. They were husbands, they were fathers, gangsters, football players, rovers; and they were everywhere. Or they were, in any case, in all of the places he had been assured they could not be found, and the need they brought to him was one they scarcely knew they had, which they spent their lives denying, heavy as those of sleepers or drowning bathers, and which could only be satisfied in the shameful, the punishing dark, and quickly, with flight and aversion as the issue of the act. (179-80)

These men pass as straight, yet they have a secret of which they are unaware. These men seem unaware of their secrets in the same way Eric is—after all, they exist where they were not supposed to be found—yet Eric reads their secrets from their bodies and fulfills them. These men seem able to pass as “normal” in society except around other men who carry the same secret. In the same way that Eric reads these men’s “secrets,” Johns are always able to read Rufus’s “secret.” The existence of these “normal” men again challenges the homosexual/heterosexual binary, as Eric acknowledges they are not actually homosexual but something else. These cravings for men’s bodies fall into that “excess” category that fits in neither category and results in secrets.

Even in his adult life, Eric tries to keep his homosexuality a secret in particular moments. While out walking with Ida, Vivaldo, and Ellis, Eric attempts to pass by changing his behavior:

Coming toward them, on the path, were two glittering, loud-talking fairies. He [Eric] pulled in his belly, looking straight ahead. “And I saw a lot of theater—I

don't know—it was very good for me.” The birds of paradise passed; their raucous cries faded.

Ida said, “I always feel so *sorry* for people like that.”

Ellis grinned. “Why should you feel sorry for them? They've got each other.”

(223)

Eric tries to create distance between him and the “fairies,” though it is not clear for whom he is trying to pass: Ellis, Ida, Vivaldo, or himself. Both Vivaldo and Ida already know about Eric's past relationship with Rufus, so his behavior here fools no one. In fact, Ida seems to be digging at Eric with her comment. Regardless, this instance implies that Eric believes identity and perceptions of such to be more complicated than simply “the body doesn't lie.”

Eric's most revealing statement on the nature of identity, passing, and secrets comes later in a conversation with Vivaldo when he openly acknowledges this contradiction in his understanding. Eric says, “It's very hard to live with that... I mean, with the sense that one is never what one seems—never—and yet, what one seems to be is probably, in some sense, almost exactly what one *is*... Do you know what I mean?” Vivaldo says, “I wish I didn't... but I'm afraid I do” (281). Here, Eric and Vivaldo—and perhaps, Baldwin himself—seem to be arguing that what matters most in creating identity are appearances. In other words, interpellation is the reality; the only identity that exists is the outside perception dictating who one is. At the same time, though, “one is never what one seems.” Whatever label is applied to that individual will never fully capture who that person is. Despite the earlier language about “truth,” here Baldwin argues that there is no truth—no *single* truth, at least. There is no inner self or identity—only the performance that is constantly changing and how that is read and interpellated by others.

This lack of an inner self is also supported in that all of the characters fail to understand who they are, no matter how hard they try. This quest for a true identity is doomed to fail. This theme is introduced in *Another Country* with the epigraph from Henry James:

They strike one, above all, as giving no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated by human use; to this inarticulate state they probably form, collectively, the most unprecedented of monuments; abysmal the mystery of what they think, what they feel, what they want, what they suppose themselves to be saying.

Henry James might as well be talking about the main characters of Baldwin's novel. The lack of knowledge the characters have about themselves is reinforced through the constant references to the characters as children. Rufus struggles and fails to understand who he is. Early in the novel, Vivaldo admits that he wonders "about his own shape," about who he is versus who he is supposed to be (56). In explaining why she is drawn to Eric, Cass tells Richard, "He has something—something I need very badly." When Richard asks her what that is, Cass answers, "A sense of himself" (314-5). If Eric has a sense of self, it is only gained through not investing in identities or expecting that self to be stable. This utter confusion and lack of "a sense of self" confirm that the only identity is that which is forced upon them from the outside via interpellation.

This instability of a "true self" or a "true identity" can also be seen through several experiences of Eric and Vivaldo. After all, Eric works as an actor, which by definition requires a performance of identity and passing as something which one is not. Vivaldo even thinks he sees who Eric really is when Eric is on screen: "It was very strange—to see more of Eric when he was acting than when he was being, as the saying goes, himself" (278). Vivaldo's ability to perceive

a truer version of Eric when Eric is pretending to be someone else presents a challenge to what his “true self” must be.

The biggest challenge to the existence of a “true self” for Eric is his affair with Cass. He does not truly love Cass, but he admits that he is physically attracted to her.<sup>4</sup> Until this point, Eric has been perceived as—and has largely perceived himself as—homosexual. Even his previous engagement to a woman is mostly played off as a misguided effort to have a straight life—an effort quickly diverted by his physical relationship with Rufus. This then poses the question: is Eric a homosexual man passing as straight in his relationship with Cass, or is Eric a man with heterosexual desires who has been passing as homosexual since his youth? Perhaps Eric is doing both simultaneously. This relationship exposes the way in which the heterosexual/homosexual binary fails to capture the dynamics of Eric’s sexual relationships.

Vivaldo similarly challenges the nature of a “true self” in his unexpected night with Eric. Until that night, the specter of same-sex attraction haunts the heterosexually-identified Vivaldo. Shortly after he tells Cass about his father calling him a queer for wearing a particular red shirt, he tells her about picking up “this queer, a young guy” with a group of men, making him go down on all of them, and beating him—possibly to death—in a parking garage (97). Vivaldo’s homophobia could be characterized as “homosexual panic,” to use another of Eve Sedgwick’s terms. But he does not always respond so violently. During his last night with Rufus, Rufus asks Vivaldo, “Have you ever wished you were queer?” Vivaldo answers, “I used to think maybe I was. Hell, I think I even *wished* I was... But I’m not. So I’m stuck” (48). He says something similar to Eric before they sleep together, telling Eric, “You can make it with both men and women and sometimes I’ve wished I could do that, I really have” (282). Two opportunities for

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<sup>4</sup> “You make me feel very strange... You make me feel things I didn't think I'd ever feel again” (242).

Vivaldo to sleep with men are presented earlier in the novel, and he turns both of them away out of fear: first on the roof with Harold near the beginning of the novel, then on his last night with Rufus before Rufus runs away. “I guess I still wonder what would have happened if I’d taken him in my arms, if I’d held him, if I hadn’t been—afraid,” Vivaldo tells Eric much later (289). Yet as the novel progresses, Vivaldo’s perception of racial and gender boundaries erodes, taking with it his homophobia and investment in heterosexuality. Vivaldo’s experience in a bar approaches Dievler’s “postsexual” society with postracial, postgender implications as well:

And something in him was breaking; he was, briefly and horribly, in a region where there were no definitions of any kind, neither of color, nor of male and female. There was only the leap and the rending and the terror and the surrender. And the terror: which all seemed to begin and end and begin again—forever—in a cavern behind the eye. (255)

This place terrifies Vivaldo at first, yet it is the place toward which the entire novel is moving. In his night with Eric, Vivaldo surrenders his fear and finds he is at ease with the loss of definitions. Vivaldo first dreams he is embracing Rufus, then wakes to find he is actually embracing Eric. Additionally, he describes this event with Eric as “another mystery, at once blacker and more pure” (324), capturing this loss of racial barriers Vivaldo undergoes. He then imagines himself as female, asking Eric to penetrate him and comparing his own thighs to “the thighs of a woman” (325). Vivaldo’s moment of lost definition in the bar is fulfilled as he and Eric destroy the binaries of black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual.

Vivaldo’s experience aligns with Bersani’s “self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self” through homosexual sex (Bersani 222). Sex with Eric becomes a way for Vivaldo to “celebrate” sex “for its very potential for death” of his sense of self—a shift Rufus was never able to

experience (222). Eric also has this loss of self in having sex with Cass, stripping meaning from the label “homosexual” and moving into a space where identities no longer exist or hold any power. It is this death of identity and the self that renders the idea of passing meaningless, as there are no categories to pass between. All that is left is human bodies taking pleasure out of sex with other human bodies.

William Cohen offers a different perspective on the results of Eric and Vivaldo’s sexual experience:

If the sexual encounter between Vivaldo and Eric disrupts the whole series of binaries that have hitherto structured power relations in the novel, where does this disintegration lead? It clearly does not move into what we might now term identity politics, nor does it tend in the opposite direction, toward sustained, transgressive destabilization of identity itself. (212)

Yet I would argue that that is precisely where the novel goes, toward “sustained transgressive destabilization of identity itself.” As a result of this encounter with Eric, Vivaldo gains new understanding. He is able to have a conversation with Ida about race and what her life has been like. He listens to her detail her affair with Ellis, then finds that he still loves her. They move past their previous challenges with race and gender in a way they could not have before Vivaldo’s experience with Eric. The novel builds towards this complete disintegration of boundaries, constantly exposing the excess in people’s experiences that does not fit into binary categories. The excess does not disappear once Vivaldo leaves Eric’s bedroom. Even if characters are still trying to force their lives into these identity boxes through keeping secrets, the novel has exposed the flimsiness, the non-existence of the boxes themselves and the complexities of the individuals.

Yet, Baldwin does struggle again with this balance between perceived identity categories and identities not easily categorized. Shortly after Vivaldo's loss of all definition while in the bar, Vivaldo thinks, "What order could prevail against so grim a privacy? And yet, without order, what value was the mystery? Order. Order. *Set thine house in order*" (255). While Vivaldo recognizes that these categorizations cannot capture reality, he also sees their usefulness in describing the "mystery" that exists. This parallels Butler's recognition of the values of identity labels despite the fact that sexuality is a lot more complicated than just "gay" and "straight." In order to queer race, gender, and sexuality, Baldwin relies upon the existence of these binary identity categories in order to break them.

The breaking down of identity categories occurs in the reconciliation scene between Ida and Vivaldo. After Vivaldo admits that he loves Ida, he begins to cry. Ida takes him into her arms and "clung to him... And it was she who was comforting him. Her long fingers stroked his back, and he began, slowly, with a horrible, strangling sound, to weep, *for she was stroking his innocence out of him*" (362—emphasis added). In this moment, Baldwin returns to the Black Nationalist binary identity constructions established early in the novel. Vivaldo is the "innocent" and clueless white boy while Ida is the knowing black woman. However, this scene depicts the transformation taking place as Ida "strokes his innocence out of him"—they are moving beyond this black/white identity construction into a space in which they can see each other as people. Now that Vivaldo is no longer "innocent," he is no longer white in the same way.

One of Baldwin's themes in the novel is the redeeming power of love. However, none of the characters seem to know what love is or know whether or not they have it. Cass's experience with love is typical of the rest of the characters. She wonders about love "and wondered if anyone really knew anything about it" (243). After she has her affair with Eric, "Now, less than

ever, did she know what love was... perhaps they could teach the other, concerning love, what neither now knew. And they were equal in that both were afraid of what unanswerable and unimaginable riddles might be uncovered in so merciless a light” (246). This lack of knowledge of love is symptomatic of the larger confusion by the characters of who they are. If the characters do not know who they are or what they want, they cannot know whether or not they are in love—or to know what love is. In the end, only Eric and Vivaldo feel like they are in love, and they only get there by moving past their investment in identities and definitions. It is impossible to love if one does not know who one is, but it seems possible to love if one understands that it is impossible to know who one is.

It is through destabilizing binaries and identities that *Another Country* redefines the passing narrative. In destabilizing these categories, *Another Country* “calls into question the very notion of authenticity itself,” as Schlossberg states of passing narratives (2). Eric’s ruminations on identity also lead to interesting implications for the significance of what it means to pass. While Mattilda’s anthology proclaims “Nobody Passes,” Eric’s thoughts show the opposite to be true: everybody is constantly passing as exactly “what one seems” to be, as there is no such thing as an authentic self (281). When there are no authentic identities, all that is left is performance and how that is perceived. This also lines up with Althusser’s ideas in which “there is no interiority, no realm outside of and prior to the materiality of discourse” (Montag 67). Baldwin’s characters never fit into these neat socially constructed identity categories, and how they are perceived is constantly shifting depending upon who is watching. In the eyes of Baldwin, the quest to know oneself will always fail, but in destroying the self, it is possible to find love, or at least a kind of happiness.



## CHAPTER TWO

### “THE SONG WE SING”: REWRITING BLACK NATIONALISM IN *JUST ABOVE MY HEAD*

Baldwin’s final novels and essays are often characterized as having a stronger Nationalist influence than his earlier works, despite the continued rift between Baldwin and the Black Arts Movement. For example, both *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Just Above My Head* feature almost entirely all-black casts moving within black environments, as opposed to Baldwin’s earlier novels. Even though Black Nationalism becomes a stronger influence in his later works, Baldwin continues to challenge identity categories through queering race, gender, and sexuality through his final novels and essays. In this chapter, I will look at how Baldwin’s last novel *Just Above My Head* incorporates many elements of Black Arts Movement writings—particularly the strong influence of music and a strong historical and political bent—and at the ways that Baldwin pushes against some of these traditions. Baldwin contributes his own spin to the material, carving out a space for male homosexuality in this genre and in the black community as a whole.

*Just Above My Head* tells the story of a group of friends who grow up together in Harlem. The story primarily focuses on Arthur Montana, a successful gospel singer from Harlem who later branches out into soul and blues, from the 1940s to a few years after his death in the 1970s. Arthur enters into several homosexual relationships, the most important of which are with Crunch, a fellow member of a gospel quartet when they are teenagers, and with Jimmy, a childhood family friend who later becomes Arthur's accompanist and lover. Arthur’s brother, Hall Montana, narrates most of the story in first person, though a large section in the middle of

the novel switches into third person limited point of view to follow Arthur's experiences while Hall is away fighting in the Korean War. The novel begins several years after Arthur's death with Hall still mourning the loss of his brother and is largely told in flashback. The timespan of the novel gives Baldwin an opportunity to create a fictional firsthand account of the Civil Rights Movement and the years following it. Several of the characters become involved in the Movement, providing Baldwin with a platform to discuss black politics in this critical time period for African American rights in the United States.

The strongest connection between *Just Above My Head* and the Black Arts Movement is the large role of music throughout the novel. While black music is important in several of Baldwin's novels and short stories, it plays the largest role in *Just Above My Head*, beginning with Arthur Montana and his career as a gospel singer. Arthur and Hall's father, Paul, is also a church musician and coaches Arthur and three other boys in a gospel quartet when the boys are teenagers. Other key characters in the novel work as accompanists with Arthur, including Peanut and Jimmy. As in many of Baldwin's other books, chapter titles and epigrams reference gospel songs and other traditional black music. Even the title of the novel, *Just Above My Head*, draws on the famous gospel song "Up Above My Head":

*Up above my head*

*I hear music in the air*

*Up above my head*

*I hear music in the air*

*Up above my head*

*I hear music in the air*

*I really do believe, I really do believe there's a Heaven somewhere.*

“Above my head” and variations on that phrase operate as a motif, recurring over and over again throughout the novel. Lyrics to other gospel songs sung by Arthur are also woven into the narrative

The connection to black music extends into the stylistic construction of the novel as well. At a total of 584 pages, *Just Above My Head* is far from brief, but it still contains experimental gestures connected to jazz and the poetry of the Black Arts Movement. The novel begins with Hall mourning his brother's death. This section is full of improvisatory riffs, repetitions, and strange punctuation with colons, dashes, and extra periods in order to capture Hall's distress and fragmented state of mind. For example:

He had been found lying in a pool of blood—why does one say a pool?—a storm, a violence, a miracle of blood: his blood, my brother's blood, my brother's blood, my brother's blood! *My* blood, my brother's blood, *my* blood, Arthur's blood, soaking into the sawdust of some grimy men's room in the filthy basement of some filthy London pub.

Oh. No. Arthur. I think I laughed. I think I couldn't cry. My brother. (4)

Much as Black Arts poets used experimentation in poetry to get at raw emotion, Baldwin here uses the repetition alternating with the halting punctuation throughout these opening pages in order to convey Hall's emotional distress. Shortly after this, Baldwin writes, “Oh, my God my God my God...” with 17 total repetitions of “my God” with one interruption: “forsake me if you will and I don't give a shit but give me back my brother” (5). Baldwin does not keep up this style throughout the novel, as that would become tiresome, but he reserves it for few moments when emotion runs high, one of the highest at the very opening of the novel. The more experimental

nature of parts of *Just Above My Head* more closely aligns this novel with other writings in the Black Arts Movement.

Baldwin also utilizes the vernacular and “hipster” language to connect his novel with this jazz-infused world. The use of the vernacular permeates all of the dialogue of the novel. Because the novel is in first person, Hall dips in and out of vernacular as well, such as in the opening of the novel as he mourns the loss of Arthur: “you didn't really jive the people, you sang, you sang, and if there was any jiving to be done, the people jived you...” (5). The use of vernacular also becomes stronger when Jimmy takes over narration for four pages at the end of the novel, telling Hall to “dig it, baby” (575). In addition to giving Jimmy a more authentic black musician’s voice, this change in language marks the shift in narration from the older Hall’s voice. Baldwin also made strong use of the vernacular in his fifth novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, narrated in first person by a 19-year-old woman from Harlem. While *Beale Street* stays primarily in lower diction, *Just Above My Head* is a blend of hipster lingo and rough language with Baldwin's typical high diction of his other novels. He continues making lofty philosophical proclamations, but he intersperses these with this more “authentic” jazz-influenced lingo to keep the novel grounded in the black music world. Baldwin’s greater use of the vernacular in his later works answers earlier criticisms from Langston Hughes as well as writers in the Black Arts Movement.

A specific word tying this novel to the Black Arts Movement and to a Black Aesthetic is the use of the word “soul.” According to Houston Baker, Jr., “'Soul' was the most ubiquitous term of the Black Aesthetic era. 'Blackness' and 'soul' came to compete, in fact, as signs for an ineffable 'something' that made black American creativity Not-Art” (13). Arthur is not only a soul musician but is also marketed by Hall as “The Soul Emperor” after he moves beyond

exclusively gospel music (22). The importance of “soul” to this novel is another way that Baldwin closely ties *Just Above My Head* into a Black Arts tradition.

In addition to the language and formal experimentation, the lives of the characters and the novel itself are repeatedly referred to as “the song.” While this is only stated once in *Another Country*, Baldwin repeatedly states this in *Just Above My Head*, making it impossible to ignore the vital connection between life, “the song,” and this story. Arthur describes “the beating of his own heart” as “his song,” drawing a strong connection between music and the essence of life (492-3). When Arthur kisses a Frenchman, Guy, at a bar, “the song” appears as well. Arthur lists all of the things running through his mind, then lands on “...the weight of yesterday, the dread of tomorrow, all, for this instant, falls away, all, but the song—he is as open and naked and questing as the song” (479). Here, the song is not just a beating heart but the rawest element of himself. The most powerful iteration of “the song” occurs in the climax of the novel as Jimmy rages against Arthur’s death and society’s ideas of “morality.” Jimmy says, “What a crock of shit. If that was true, how could we sing, how could we know that the music comes from us, we build our bridge into eternity, we are the song we sing?” (575-6). Jimmy claims that he doesn’t just sing a song; rather, he embodies the song himself.

The novel *Just Above My Head* also becomes a kind of song. Hall describes this novel he is narrating as “a love song to my brother. It is an attempt to face both love and death” (517). Jimmy also draws this close relationship between music and novels. He tells Hall, “Some days, I don't know if I'm trying to write a book, or trying to write a symphony” (520). When Jimmy takes over narration of the novel, Hall describes the transition as a handing over of a solo, as if they are playing jazz together rather than writing a book: “Perhaps I must now do what I have most feared to do: surrender my brother to Jimmy, give Jimmy's piano the ultimate solo: which

must also now, be taken as the bridge” (574). “The song” is a prayer, is Hall's novel, is Jimmy’s life. Music and “the song” again come to represent everything about these black men’s lives, just as Baldwin wrote about “the beat” in *Another Country* (12).

Another connection between music and the novel—or the novel as a kind of music—is built when Baldwin uses nonsense words at the end of the novel, including a kind of refrain or skat accompaniment in the novel’s final pages. As Hall tells the story of a dream he has had, the words, “Oho, oho” repeat five times, moving from voice to voice, before landing on “Oh, my loving brother...” in Hall’s voice (583-4). These riffs again echo Hall's claim that the novel is a “love song,” as he is including jazz elements in the text of the work.

Jimmy's claim that he does not know if he is writing a book or a symphony also implies that the two art forms are much closer together than they might seem. In this way, Baldwin argues that even novels can be a type of jazz, a type of soul music—that a novel can hold the same authenticity as a black American art form. Even though Black Arts artists often criticize the novel as a form, Baldwin here uses the same stylistic moves as those used in Black Arts poetry and jazz to the same effect. In using them in a longer form, Baldwin just has to use them more sparingly to keep the effect from becoming overwhelming.

In addition to the strong influence of African American music on the novel, politics also play a large role in *Just Above My Head*. The strong role of politics connects the novel to the Black Arts Movement as well, as the novel advocates for African American rights while also portraying atrocities faced by African Americans between the 1940s and the 1970s. History is emphasized not just through the characters’ experiences being told in flashback but also in its role in characters’ searches for identity. At one point, Arthur observes “the attempt, more, the necessity, to excavate a history, to find out the truth about oneself” (500). Baldwin does not

directly speak about slavery and its legacy in this novel, but he does address a connection between African Americans and Africa through Julia, Arthur, and Paul. Baldwin also includes two trips through the American South by Arthur Montana, perhaps paralleling Baldwin's own trips through the South. Arthur's first trip is with his gospel quartet when he is a teenager, and the second trip occurs later when Arthur has become a solo gospel singer. Arthur performs almost exclusively at political gatherings in churches on this second tour. Through these trips, Baldwin describes some of the horrors experienced by black Americans in the South, providing a grounding for some of the characters' political beliefs. After one of Arthur's performances in Birmingham on this second tour, members of the KKK attack, kidnapping and presumably killing Arthur's friend and accompanist, Peanut.

Baldwin's depictions of these atrocities lend themselves toward a call to action, like in many of these other writings of the Black Arts Movement. These incidents of violence, Peanut's disappearance as well as the earlier run-in with the KKK members in Birmingham, show a strong need for change and a need for the black community to work together. Rather than depicting black and white people uniting for change, this novel shows black characters taking care of themselves, demanding their own rights, and operating within their own communities independent of white people, much as in *If Beale Street Could Talk*.<sup>5</sup> This stronger separatist attitude is also expressed by Arthur and Hall's father Paul in *Just Above My Head*. In the 1940s, Paul gives the boys in Arthur's gospel quartet the following advice:

We didn't wait for white people to have a change of heart, or change their laws, or anything, in order to be responsible for each other, to love our women, or raise our

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<sup>5</sup> The only exception to this in *Beale Street* is the white attorney who takes Lonnie's case, but he still has to be pushed by Tish's mother and sister to actually do his job. Tish's mom is the one who goes to Puerto Rico to track down the woman making the rape accusation, not the lawyer.

children. You better not wait, either. They ain't going to change their laws for us—it just ain't in them. They change their laws when their laws make *them* uncomfortable, or when they think they can see some kind of advantage for *them*—we ain't, really, got nothing to do with it. (300)

Paul, who also describes himself as an ex-Garveyite, encourages the boys to be self-reliant. Paul, along with Peanut and Hall's friend Sidney who converts to Islam, is one of the more radical voices in the novel. In this way, these last two novels fit better within the Black Arts canon than his other novels. However, Baldwin is not entirely separatist in his thinking, even in this final work. He continues to challenge the other Black Arts writers who depict all white people as evil and inherently unable to understand the plight of African Americans. He refuses to depict *all* white people as bad, racist, and/or unhelpful and leaves space for people to experience transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Another quality tying Baldwin's writing to the Black Arts Movement is Pan-Africanism. Even though Baldwin does not believe that returning to Africa is a solution, or that Africans are in exactly the same situation as African Americans, Baldwin shows a desire to connect to African roots in *Just Above My Head*. Baldwin is typically depicted as an anti-Pan-Africanist, such as in Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, but he became more open to Pan-Africanism later in his life.

An example of Baldwin's openness to Pan-Africanism appears in *No Name in the Street* (1972) when he writes about the plight of Algerians in Paris. He acknowledges that Algerians and African Americans come to Paris from different contexts, but he also begins to see a

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<sup>6</sup> "I saw some—not many, but some—white boys and girls and men and women come to freedom on that road, and it was as though they couldn't believe it, that they could actually be, just *be*, that they could step out of the lie and the trap of their history. What I had always wanted to say to them is almost exactly what they said to me, and their being recalled to life was a beautiful thing to behold." (*Just Above My Head* 413)



connection between them. Algeria had been under French colonial rule until the early 1960s when Algeria gained independence. Those Algerians who came to Paris were often poor and struggling to survive. Baldwin writes with sympathy for the Algerians and begins to relate their experiences to his own:

One day they were going home, and they knew exactly where home was... But on my side of the ocean, or so it seemed to me then, we had surrendered everything, or had had everything taken away, and there was no place for us to go: we *were* home... I will not say that I envied them, for I didn't, and the directness of their hunger, or hungers, intimidated me; but I respected them, and as I began to discern what their history had made of them, I began to suspect, somewhat painfully, what my history had made of me. (24-25)

Baldwin sympathizes with the Algerians and lifts up their experiences in his extended essay. In looking at the situation of the Algerians, Baldwin also sees something of his own experience, and his understanding of the Algerians impacts how he understands himself. This connection between African oppression and the oppression of African Americans lends itself to a Pan-African argument. Baldwin, in fact, makes this connection more directly just a few pages later: “It was strange to find oneself, in another language, in another country, listening to the same old song and hearing oneself condemned in the same old way” (26-27). It is a mistake to characterize Baldwin as resolutely opposed to Pan-Africanism, especially in his later works.

The connection between African American experience and Algerians is also made briefly in *Just Above My Head*. While he is traveling abroad performing in Paris, Arthur meets a Frenchman named Guy and spends a few days with him. Guy mentions he previously had a companion—presumably, a love—from Algeria, Mustapha, staying with him until Mustapha was

forced to return to Algeria. “Well—as you may know—there is some misunderstanding—some difficulties, so I might say—between France and Algeria these days,” says Guy evasively of the Algerian revolt taking place (482). Before abruptly changing the subject, Arthur realizes that there might be similarities in the relationship between black and white Americans and the relationship between Algerians and the French. Arthur thinks:

The truth is, he thinks of Guy as French, someone, therefore, who has nothing to do with New York, or Georgia. He has no learned, or willed response to him because Guy has never existed for him; neither in his imagination, nor his life, has he ever been threatened by him—that is, by a Frenchman. But he is dimly aware that this may be connected with his reluctance to discuss Algeria.

Arthur wonders about the relationship between Mustapha and Guy, perhaps imagining it as a parallel relationship to his own with Guy. Just as Guy’s house is decorated in North African memorabilia—likely from Guy’s time as a soldier—it is also full of American jazz records. Guy refers to Arthur as *mon chanteur sauvage*, “my savage singer,” as a term of endearment—which Arthur surprisingly endures—also drawing connections between Arthur’s blackness and an imagined primitive African ancestry. Arthur and Guy later reach a standstill in attempting to talk about race when Guy refuses to examine his own history and his own whiteness. Baldwin explains the standstill: “it is not because he cannot know Arthur’s ground, but because he does not know his own” (499). While Arthur initially cannot contextualize Guy, he eventually sees parallels between Guy and white Americans, just as he sees parallels between the Algerians and himself.

However, Baldwin was not always as receptive to Pan-African ideas, which is why he was largely depicted as anti-Pan-African. Cleaver points to Baldwin’s criticism of the 1956

Conference of African-Negro Writers and Artists in Paris in Baldwin's essay "Princes and Powers," included in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), as an example of how he opposed Pan-Africanism. Cleaver writes, "But the revulsion which Baldwin felt for the blacks at this conference, who were glorying in their blackness, seeking and showing their pride in Negritude and the African Personality, drives him to self-revealing sortie after sortie, so obvious in 'Princes and Powers'" (99-100). In this essay, Baldwin records the disagreements among participants and positions himself as a mere observer and scribe at times,<sup>7</sup> though he intersperses the essay with his own questions and proclamations as well. Baldwin's key question is, "Is it possible to describe as a culture what may simply be, after all, a history of oppression?" (*Nobody Knows My Name* 28). Baldwin, of course has his own answer:

What they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men. And this ache united people who might otherwise have been divided as to what a man should be. (29)

In some ways, Baldwin's later writing on the Algerians in *No Name in the Street* is still asking that same question, relying upon shared oppression to find commonality. However, he seems to value that similarity in experience more in *No Name in the Street* than he had eleven years before in "Princes and Powers." Ezenwa-Ohaeto also acknowledges that "...Baldwin was gradually

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<sup>7</sup> This is pronounced in the way Baldwin ends the essay, merely narrating the scene: "And the dialogue ended immediately afterward, at six-fifty-five, with Senghor's statement that this was the first of many such conferences, the first of many dialogues..." then describing the Paris street scene around them (55).

coming to terms with the African reality and... understood the nature of exploitation that militated against development in Africa” (112). Baldwin’s later works show a changing consciousness of what was taking place in Africa and how that relates to African American experience. Ezenwa-Ohaeto also notes Baldwin “changed the tone of his later works, as he began to perceive Africa from a sympathetic dimension” (112). This shift towards Pan-Africanism is also noticeable in *Just Above My Head*, published seven years after *No Name in the Street*.

Julia’s trip to Abidjan is a search for shared experiences and a shared identity with Africans. Julia is Jimmy’s sister and, at the time she leaves for Africa, Hall’s lover. She travels to learn something about who she is. As one might expect from Baldwin, the trip does not turn out as she had hoped, and she comes back uncertain of what exactly she has learned or of how she has changed. Rather than finding herself or any answers, Julia returns with more questions. Baldwin writes, “If she had wanted to find another definition of what it meant to be a woman, and especially a black woman, well, then, she had found it: but it did not appear to be a role that she could play. Now, she did not exist, on two continents” (524). This notion of not existing echoes Baldwin’s assessment in *No Name in the Street* of having “no place for us to go” and no home. Baldwin describes neither America nor Africa as Julia’s home, and both are portrayed as equally hostile; the United States is described as “her mysteriously barbaric country,” and Africa is described as “the landscape to which she had chained herself for so long” (524). Much as the characters of *Another Country* are searching for a sense of self without quite finding it, Julia searches for a sense of identity and returns home just as unsure.

Julia is unable to find what she was looking for, but the trip does change her: “The African sun had darkened her skin and coarsened her hair: and she liked that. But she did not know—yet—what she had gained, or lost. She felt that she had gained—something—something

for which she had, as yet, no words” (525). The trip to Africa makes her physical appearance more African, and her pleasure in this change makes an important political statement. However, while she looks more African, it is not clear if she feels a stronger connection with Africa or not. The novel ends without returning to Julia’s experience or her new knowledge. The fact that Baldwin included Julia’s trip to Africa in his novel shows that he is open to the possibility of connecting with African roots or of finding commonalities in experiences, even if he is unsure of exactly what that connection might look like.

The idea of going to Africa appears earlier in the novel, too. Paul lectures the boys of the gospel quartet on the idea of going back to Africa versus staying in the United States. Paul says:

Listen. You all are young. Like it or not, we here now and we can't go nowhere else. I was a kind of half-assed Garveyite when I was young—you would have been, too, had you been young when I was... All I'm saying is, you going to have to do what we've always done, ain't nothing new—take what you have, and make what you want... (300)

Paul’s connection to Garveyism aligns him with Black Nationalist beliefs early in the novel. His sentiment, “we here now and we can't go nowhere else,” appears in other Black Nationalist works as well. According to Robert Browne, “If we have been separated from Africa for so long that we are no longer quite at ease there... then we are left with only one place to make our home, and that is in this land to which we were brought in chains” (quoted in *Flowers* 8). Both Paul and Julia are trying to find what it means for them to be African American and to find a place where they belong while feeling like they do not belong anywhere. This is a struggle for Arthur as well:

...he puts the two words together *black American* and hears, at once, the very crescendo of contradiction and the unanswering and unanswerable thunder and

truth of history—which is nothing more and nothing less than the beating of his own heart, his song. In many ways, he does not like being a black American, or being black, or being American, or being Arthur, and, for many millions of people, in his country, and elsewhere—including France—his existence was proof of the unspeakable perversity of history, a flaw in the nature of God. (492-3)

Looking to Africa becomes one of the ways that Baldwin and his characters search for an identity, for a way to reconcile these conflicting aspects of themselves. Baldwin leaves characters like Arthur, Julia, and Paul in a kind of limbo with no real answers about who they are; however, Africans seem to be experiencing the same identity crisis, such as the Algerians living in Paris of whom Baldwin also writes. Baldwin's questioning of identity and of a connection to the African continent is not necessarily contrary to Pan-African thought—instead, Baldwin explores a shared identity struggle in a postcolonial world. The strong influence of jazz in the novel and the exploration of the Black Aesthetic also lends itself to a stronger Pan-African leaning in the novel.

As I have been arguing, Baldwin's novel falls solidly into the Black Arts canon in many ways: in the emphasis on black music, on black history and politics, and on connections with Africa. However, Baldwin pushes against the Black Arts tradition in his inclusion of homosexual relationships. Baldwin's inclusion of queer sexuality in his works was enough to incur the wrath of writers like Cleaver, but I would argue that *Just Above My Head* should be seen as stretching the boundaries of the Black Arts tradition to include other kinds of experiences that were often excluded—not as a novel outside of or opposed to this tradition.

Unlike Baldwin's earlier novels, *Just Above My Head* includes extensive explorations of homosexual relationships between black men—first between Arthur and Crunch as teenagers

then later between Arthur and Jimmy as adults. In this novel, it is impossible to associate queer sexuality with whiteness, as could perhaps be concluded from *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*. *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* also includes homosexual relationships between black men, such as Leo Proudhammer's incestuous experiences with his brother and Leo's relationship with Black Christopher, but black homosexual relationships take center stage in his final novel. By placing it in a black context and by portraying family and friends as accepting, Baldwin makes homosexuality a part of black experience and a part of the community. Baldwin shows that homosexuality is not at odds with blackness as other writers like Cleaver argue.

However, even in Baldwin's depictions of acceptance or at least tolerance of homosexuality between two black men, this is still limited to certain expressions of homosexuality and masculinity. Baldwin occasionally criticized "effeminate" men, placing himself, in some ways, not too far away from the homophobia in Black Arts writings. For example, as Hall is explaining Arthur's homosexuality to his son Tony, Hall says, "I'm proud of my brother, your uncle, and I'll be proud of him until the day I die. You should be, too. Whatever the fuck your uncle was, and he was a whole lot of things, he was nobody's *faggot*" (28—emphasis added). By "faggot," he certainly means the more effeminate gay men whom Baldwin frequently disparages. This sentiment is not limited to Baldwin's fictional characters and sometimes appears in Baldwin's own voice in his essays, such as in Baldwin's reaction in *No Name in the Street* to Cleaver's criticisms of him:

I felt that he used my public reputation against me both naively and unjustly, and I also felt that I was confused in his mind with the unutterable debasement of the

male—with all those faggots, punks, and sissies, the sight and sound of whom, in prison, must have made him vomit more than once. (171-172)

One gets the impression that these men would perhaps make Baldwin vomit as well. Rather than countering Cleaver's sentiment, Baldwin almost agrees with Cleaver and attempts to distance himself from such men. Similar discomfort can also be seen in Baldwin's critiques of Gide in "The Male Prison" and of Eric's disgust when walking past effeminate gay men in *Another Country*, despite Eric's own homosexuality. While pushing for inclusion and acceptance of homosexual sex and homosexual relationships in the black community, family, and church, Baldwin stops short of challenging a wider conception of black masculinity. While he allows for sex with men to remain a masculine act, Baldwin voices opposition to effeminacy in men in several of his writings. An exception to this is one of Baldwin's final works, the essay "Here Be Dragons," which I will address shortly.

Despite these limitations, Baldwin still pushes for a wider range of sexual behaviors to fall under "masculine" behavior. Perhaps to make homosexuality more acceptable or accessible to audiences, the narrator of the novel is not Arthur but rather his straight brother. Hall describes his discomfort with Arthur's homosexuality several times in the novel but also expresses his frustration of not being able to tell Arthur that he still loves him anyway. When Jimmy takes over narration in the last few pages, he calls out Hall for his discomfort and for the impact that it had on Arthur:

...all Arthur wanted was for the people who had *made* the music, from God knows who, to Satchmo, Mr. Jelly-Lord, Bessie, Mahalia, Miles, Ray, Trane, his *daddy*, and *you*, too, mother-fucker, *you*! It was only when he got scared about



what *they might think of what he'd done to their song*—our song—that he really started to be uptight about our love. (577)

This moment implicates the straight reader as well for whatever discomfort he or she might feel towards people in homosexual relationships and challenges them to question the impact of their own feelings on others. Shortly after this, Hall tells the reader that these feelings of insecurity did stick with Arthur, even though Arthur “knows better, he also knows that he does not know, will never be released from the judgment, or the terror, in his own eyes” (579). This discomfort is likely why Arthur fights with Jimmy and is a part of the reason Arthur turns to drugs—drugs which contributed to his heart attack at the age of 39. By the end of the novel, the hope is that the reader will understand the genuineness of Arthur and Jimmy’s love, if not Arthur and Crunch’s love years earlier. Hall becomes a model for straight siblings, straight family members, when he sees Jimmy and Arthur together and finally tells Arthur, “I love you. Don’t forget it. And, whatever makes you happy, that’s what you supposed to do, and whoever makes you happy, that’s where you supposed to be” (560). Hall follows that with a narration of how Jimmy’s love changes Arthur for the better to further explain why he accepts him and continues to love him.

Hall’s acceptance of Arthur and Jimmy’s relationship also signals another key deviation from typical Black Arts writings; not only is Baldwin writing about homosexuality positively, but he is also writing it into the fabric of the black family and the black church. The family and the church are two of the most conservative institutions and two that are important in Black Arts. Typically, they are set up in opposition to homosexuality, which is construed as a perversion—or, from the opposite side, as institutions that must be escaped by homosexuals in order to lead happy lives.

In using Hall as a narrator and a mediator of sorts, Baldwin shows how a homosexual couple becomes a part of Hall's family life as Julia and Jimmy become an important part of his children's lives. This is most strongly signaled when Hall's son Tony asks him about Arthur's sexuality and Arthur and Jimmy's relationship. Hall asks him, "What did *you* think of your uncle?" Tony responds, "I thought he was a crazy, beautiful cat. I loved him—that's why... I just wanted you to tell me" (29). This conversation is fraught with tears, but after Tony and Hall get back into the dining room, Tony lets Hall know everything is okay: "Tony looks at me for a moment, and smiles; a different smile than he has ever smiled before" (30). Arthur is still an important and beloved person in the family, and being open about his homosexuality actually allows him to be loved even more by his brother and nephew.

These homosexual relationships also become a part of church life, as Arthur and Crunch—and later Arthur and Jimmy—make a living performing gospel music in the church. In fact, their homosexuality becomes a part of the performance as gospel songs are repeatedly tied to expressions of homosexual love before these church audiences. Jimmy expresses his love for Arthur through unexpectedly prompting Arthur to sing "Just a Closer Walk with Thee":

*Grant it, Jesus,*  
*if You please.*  
*Daily, walking, close to Thee.*  
*let it be,*  
*dear Lord,*  
*let it be. (562)*

Hall first describes this performance as "sacrilegious," but then he acknowledges the power of the music: "...his call... brought from Arthur a response which seemed to ring out over those

apocalyptic streets, and caused me, and the two men standing at the church door with me, to look back and see where that sound was coming from” (562). This expression of their love in such a blatant way draws people in, entrances people—family and strangers alike. They do not recoil from it. In fact, Hall credits this moment as one of the things that helped bring about “Arthur’s first hit record” (561). Hall takes it even further than that, describing their singing together as, “It was a wonder, a marvel—a mystery: I call it *holy*” (562—emphasis added).

A similar moment happens between Arthur and Crunch as teenagers while singing with their quartet. It is also implied that moments like this are common between Arthur and Jimmy in the fourteen years they perform together. Even as Arthur performs alone just before he dies, he sings a song specifically for Jimmy on a Paris music hall stage: “*Boy, you sure took me for one big ride*” (578). Rumors circulate about Arthur’s sexuality showing that not everyone approves of the way he lives his life, but people still flock to his performances despite the fact that Arthur and Jimmy cannot and do not try to hide their love for each other. Their homosexual relationship becomes a visible and accepted part of their gospel, and is even described as “holy.” Baldwin carves out a space for their relationship in the church and portrays wide acceptance to and tolerance of it, despite Arthur’s doubts. He challenges the widespread homophobia of Black Arts artists and typical depictions of the church, providing a different narrative that seems plausible.

In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin incorporates many elements of the Black Arts movement and Black Nationalism as a whole, most notably in his use of black music and in stressing the importance of history in understanding who one is. Baldwin challenges conceptions of what can be considered Black Arts literature, making an argument for the novel as a valid black art and in considering Pan Africanism as a way of gaining some understanding of oneself. Baldwin’s novel depicts the acceptance of a black homosexual man into the family and into the

church, creating a space for Arthur but also for James Baldwin himself to take part in a larger black culture and social movement.

Although I believe this novel falls into the Black Arts tradition in many ways, there are aspects of *Just Above My Head* and some of Baldwin's other later works that continue to queer boundaries between binary categories of race, sexuality, and gender. Baldwin does not completely abandon this argument in his later works. Baldwin's work that most directly queers identity is his essay "Here Be Dragons," originally published in *Playboy* in 1985 and collected in *The Price of the Ticket*. This essay is devoid of the hatred of effeminacy in men that was mentioned earlier. Instead, Baldwin writes, "[T]here is a man in every woman and a woman in every man" (677). In the final paragraph of the essay, Baldwin returns to this idea and explains in greater depth:

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it. (690)

Baldwin challenges boundaries between genders and races here, queering both systems of categorization. This androgyny conflicts with Baldwin's previously mentioned problems with effeminacy. Baldwin's late essay gives the impression that Baldwin is overcompensating in these anti-effeminacy comments, when he mentions, "On every street corner, I was called a faggot" (684). Baldwin was also described in magazine articles as having an effeminate appearance,<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As he was in the May 17, 1963 issue of *TIME Magazine*.

which was either based in reality or emphasized as a way to discredit Baldwin as a legitimate writer and critic. This essay seems like a much more honest approach than some of these more defensive pieces as Baldwin confronts his own experiences of being disparaged and emasculated for his own gender expression.

Much as he does in *Another Country*, Baldwin continues to denounce identity labels into his later works. This is most pronounced in “Here Be Dragons” when Baldwin writes:

Such figures as Boy George do not disturb me nearly so much as do those relentlessly hetero (sexual?) keepers of the keys and seals, those who know what the world needs in the way of order and who are ready and willing to supply that order. This rage for order can result in chaos, and in this country, chaos connects with color. (689)

This section relates to the “Set thine own house in order” section from *Another Country*. Not only does Baldwin address the relationship between order and chaos; he also draws a relationship between gender expression and race. *Just Above My Head* also continues to push against this kind of “order” in the way that the characters, despite their largely homosexual behavior, never label their sexuality. Hall tells his son that Arthur has been with women, too, so the reader knows Arthur is not entirely homosexual, even though those are the only sexual encounters we see in the novel. Baldwin continues to push against a gender binary in a scene of *Just Above My Head* as well, a moment that seems a small recurrence of Vivaldo’s “rending and terror” from *Another Country*. As a teenage Arthur looks at Julia, Baldwin writes, “Then terror overtook him, like a cloud, like thunder, like the water coming over one’s head, and he held his breath, paralyzed, staring at the girl—staring, in a way, into his mirror” (231). Despite their gender difference,

Arthur recognizes a shared experience and understanding in Julia that shakes his own sense of self.

Baldwin also continues to challenge the meaning of whiteness in these later works. *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) challenges race more extensively than *Just Above My Head* in the description of Leo's mother, "a handsome, almost white woman" from the South (20). Leo's brother Caleb explains to him:

Our mama is *almost* white... but that don't make her white. You got to be *all* white to be white... our mama is a colored woman. You can tell she's a colored woman because she's married to a colored *man*, and she's got two colored *children*. Now, you know ain't no white lady going to do a thing like that. (61)

Caleb's description captures the arbitrary and sometimes fluid nature of racial labels as well as their serious implications. Ethnic non-assimilated characters—Italians and a Greek director who gives Leo his first break—also populate *Train*, challenging the category of whiteness and of a black/white racial binary. *Just Above My Head* doesn't include racially passing characters, but it continues to examine the construction of whiteness through Arthur's experiences in Paris.

Baldwin writes an even more direct parallel to Vivaldo's "rending and terror" experience when he recounts his own early sexual experiences in "Here Be Dragons," specifically a tryst with a Spanish and Irish "Harlem racketeer" who fell in love with Baldwin "shortly after [he] turned sixteen" (681). Even though he was still preaching as a child evangelist at this time, Baldwin fell in love with this man as well. Baldwin claims:

For what this really means is that all of the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in

my life. Not without anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself. (681)

Baldwin's description of his experience as a teenager aligns with Bersani's destruction of identity and the self through homosexual sex. As Dievler writes, the affair "had the effect of obliterating any sense of his own sexual identity in terms of the categories that dominated American culture then (and today)" (161). This early experience of Baldwin's reverberates throughout all of his works, even though he doesn't write about the encounter until the very end of his life.

Utilizing Black Nationalist identity constructions as a starting place in both *Another Country* and *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin complicates those identities and crosses boundaries in order to expose the chaos of lived experience that defies categorization. At other times, Baldwin deploys those same identity constructions in order to discuss the impacts of racism and homophobia. Baldwin addresses social inequalities and oppression and challenges the constraints created by these identity constructs by negotiating his way between Black Nationalism and the queering of identities.

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