

JAMES BALDWIN:
TAPPING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF RACE & SEXUALITY

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by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to recover James Baldwin as a black queer vernacular intellectual. In my introduction, I look at what Grant Farred calls “vernacular intellectuals” as important cultural figures that challenge the notion of the separation of the popular from the academic. I extend Farred’s discussion on the vernacular intellectual by attempting to situate Baldwin in a dominant heterosexual black American culture, and explore how same-sex desire can complicate the space of the vernacular.

Thesis Structure: Because of Baldwin’s location in different intellectual places, this thesis’ necessary interdisciplinarity draws upon literary, anthropological, historical, and cultural sources. Stylistically, my writing “performs” each chapter within their larger discourses—the novel, the essay, and case law. Chapter 1 critiques the novel, Another Country, as art and is written fluidly with audible texts from black popular music in an attempt to force the reader to think sonically as well as textually. Chapter 2 explores The Fire Next Time—two of Baldwin’s essays—and is more focused on rhetorical analyses. I purposely and meticulously dismantle Loving v. Virginia (388 US 1) to symbolize the tedious nature of engaging politics in the legal realm and argue against an exclusively legal approach to social movements in Chapter 3. Collectively, these chapters speak to the vernacular and James Baldwin’s intervention as a queer black intellectual. Finding a traditional conclusion unimaginable, I end with a coda in order to emphasize this project’s commitment to rethinking lessons learned from James Baldwin—specifically his politics of impossibility—and how contemporary figures continue his work of tapping beneath the surface.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Elise Young was born on June 7, 1983 in Baton Rouge Louisiana, the second child of Lenell Davis-Young and Henry Young III. She graduated from Southern University Laboratory School in 2001 and enrolled at Vassar College the same year. Jessica intended to major in Political Science at Vassar, but because of Vassar's liberal arts curriculum, she also took advantage of the wide-range of courses offered. Her junior year, she declared herself a Psychology major following in the footsteps of her mother, and continued to study outside of her declared field. Jessica, ultimately, received her B.A. from Vassar College with a double major in Africana Studies and Psychology in 2005. For her thesis, she filmed a documentary, "Talkin' 'Bout Talkin': Black in America," which was awarded the Paul Robeson Prize for best undergraduate thesis in Africana Studies.

Prior to enrolling at Cornell, Jessica worked at Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD) in Boston for two years as a legal assistant, contemplating a career in law. She decided to pursue interdisciplinary study instead, and entered Cornell University's Africana Studies & Research Center in 2007. While at Cornell, she also took a number of English and Government graduate courses to support her research interests and writing. Jessica received her M.P.S. from Cornell's Africana Studies & Research Center in 2009. Her professional life is dedicated to quality research, writing, and teaching and she hopes to promote interdisciplinary study and innovative scholarship.

For my parents and godchildren

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INTRODUCTION

In his “Autobiographical Notes” James Baldwin writes of the responsibility of writers who take up the so-called Negro problem, to “go beneath the surface, to tap the source...social affairs are not generally speaking the writer’s prime concern, whether they ought to be or not; it is absolutely necessary that he establish between himself and these affairs a distance.”¹ Baldwin did not want his work to resemble those that he criticized in “Many Thousands Gone” and *Everybody’s Protest Novel*—primarily Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Richard Wright’s Native Son. Baldwin critiques the development (or lack thereof) of characters found in “protest literature.” With careful deconstruction he attempts to set a standard and responsibility for the serious writer. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel” Baldwin argues that the myth of blackness in its various forms and manifestations (i.e. Topsy, Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima, and Bigger—read as “nigger”) has overwhelmed literature to such an extent that instead of characters representing the personification of humanness, they, instead, reinforce inhumane stereotypes of blackness.

To make this claim, Baldwin blurs the line between myth and reality. When discussing the human being he warns against “overlooking, denying, [and] evading his complexity;”² yet, he uses the reality of the myth—or the created reality that the myth has been afforded—to make his case. He speaks of the Uncle Tom, Bigger/“nigger,” within us all as if to infer that the issue is not that these myths are unreal; rather, that they are incomplete. His frustration does not seem to be that Bigger has nigger tendencies (“I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods ... simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter”³), but that all we see of him is his niggerdom.

¹ Baldwin, James. “Autobiographical Notes,” p. 7.

² Baldwin, James. “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” p. 13.

³ Baldwin, James. “Many Thousands Gone,” p. 29.

Baldwin's conceptualization of identity is vastly dependent upon breaking the myth/reality paradigm. In "A Question of Identity," the disgruntled American in Paris is forced to face the myth of what an American is "the Marshall Plan, Hollywood, the Yankee dollar, television, or Senator McCarthy."⁴ He or she is perplexed by their association with that particular American myth, while simultaneously believing in the legend/myth of Paris as an old city and "cushion[ing] himself...against the shock of reality...clinging to its image."⁵ Baldwin's work on mythology raises questions about homosexuality—How do the largely mythological or imagined categories of "home," "community," and "belonging" play out in the heteronormative? In asking that queer people hide their sexuality or at least not flaunt it is the dominant culture seeking a mythical home where questions are not asked?

Part of the beauty of Baldwin's work is the way in which it lends itself to several discourses. Go Tell It On The Mountain, with its suggestive title, is, on the surface, about Christianity and Giovanni's Room is known as Baldwin's breakthrough novel on homosexuality. Yet, Baldwin is eager to point out:

Giovanni's Room is not really about homosexuality. It's the vehicle through which the book moves. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, for example, is not about a church and *Giovanni* is not really about homosexuality. It's about what happens to you if you're afraid to love anybody. Which is much more interesting than the question of homosexuality.⁶

His preoccupation with the human condition allows us to make connections to his work where, on the surface, no connection exists. In the spirit of Baldwin and "going beneath the surface" this project investigates how Baldwin tapped beneath the surface

⁴ Baldwin, James. "A Question of Identity," p. 95.

⁵ Id., p. 93.

⁶ Troupe, Quincy. *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, p. 176.

of race and sexuality in Another Country and The Fire Next Time, and how his broader work has implications for contemporary race and sexuality politics.

Theoretical Framework

The Vernacular

Invoking Antonio Gramsci's notion that all human beings are potentially intellectuals but may not be socially recognized as such, and Grant Farred's extension and complication of Gramsci's intellectual—this thesis presents James Baldwin as a vernacular intellectual. Farred describes the vernacular as “a distinct definition of—and a way of being—the intellectual,”⁷ where intellectual thought “is a mobile and flexible experience.”⁸ Baldwin's oeuvre signals a commitment to innovative reexamination of important themes such as love, sexuality, and social movements vis-à-vis the popular and the academic and thus signify par excellence, the vernacular intellectual. His work is marked by its intimate connection to his personal life, which illustrates a “politics of being”⁹ and thinking in the vernacular. His oeuvre signals adaptability and immersion in a variety of discourses that dominate contemporary intellectual discourse such as the deconstruction of race, imperialism, literary theory, satire, theology, and cultural politics in a language of historical sharpness and rhetorical tightness.

As both a well-known Civil Rights figure and creative writer, Baldwin, by occupation, moved “back and forth between the popular and the political realms.”¹⁰ His involvement in both spheres allowed him to go beyond the expectations placed upon the essay as opposed to creative writing and shift between both modes within his

⁷ Farred, Grant. *What's My Name?: Black Vernacular Intellectuals*, p. 2.

⁸ Id., p. 14.

⁹ Id., p. 17.

¹⁰ Id., p. 23.

own texts. The vernacular is the space where Baldwin negotiates the tension between the political “race-man” and the more sexually free novelist. As a sexually marked figure—in both his personal life and the more “personal” realm of fiction—Baldwin subverts the heteronormative “race man” category. Through his writing, he also reconfigures the creative sphere as a space for rigorous critique by infusing his “essayist voice” in his creative writing. Baldwin’s intervention is that “the pleasurable, within the vernacular, is always potentially political.”¹¹ He dwells in the vernacular space where his creative writing can do political work alongside his essays.

Queer Interventions into the Vernacular

As a queer black man, James Baldwin occupied a space both inside and outside of the larger heteronormative black community. He speaks from the margins of both heteronormative and white-mainstream society politically and personally. Baldwin uses his subaltern position to rethink the very constructs that are used to define him, especially sexuality.

Despite being regarded as one of the most celebrated American gay thinkers, Baldwin never would embrace the label “gay.” Instead he chose to turn the question of sexuality back upon heteronormativity and the creation of labels: “People invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity ... Straight cats invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves.”¹² For Baldwin, it seems as though same-sex desire was not a particularly interesting issue, but the potential for love and life that are manifested by such a desire, like other heterosexual desires, was of more importance. Robert F. Reid-Pharr says of Baldwin: “he refused, throughout his career, to accept the

¹¹ *Id.*, p. 1.

¹² Adams, Stephen, *Giovanni’s Room: The Homosexual as Hero*, p. 132.

neat categories into which we deposit our multiple selves, preferring instead to insist upon the funkiness of our existences.”¹³ Baldwin realized that he was more than a “race man,” because the characteristics associated with such a neat category did not account for the fullness or funkiness of his being, including but in no way limited to his sexuality.

Blacks as well as gays are stereotyped as being “naturally and primarily sexual.”¹⁴ Baldwin’s sexuality, then, becomes a salient issue for his audience. His very body threatens the hegemonic order because the black queer body has been historically used as a constant reminder of what is not “normal.” The threat of being reduced to sexual categorization “doubly rebounds on black gays as racism and heterosexism represent blackness and gayness as symbols of impurity, sexual degeneracy, and disease.”¹⁵ By offering a black face to homosexuality, James Baldwin exposes the impossibility to think sexuality on its own. Baldwin not only invades the stereotypically white space of the homosexual with his blackness, but also the stereotypically heterosexual space of blackness with his queerness. Baldwin’s gift to the larger black and gay communities is his ability to destroy many of the myths that haunt them both.

Historicization

James Baldwin did not emerge out of a historical vacuum. There is a long tradition of American black gay intellectuals—both recognized and ignored. Most notably, the Harlem Renaissance produced the likes of Richard Bruce Nugent, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes who used a variety of artistic mediums to articulate black life. Seeking to recover a history of black queer self-

¹³ Reid-Pharr. *Dinge*, p. 92.

¹⁴ James, Joy. *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*, p. 140.

¹⁵Id, p. 141.

determination in America, this project works against the heteronormative master narrative. bell hooks explains, “Domination and colonization attempt to destroy our capacity to know the self, to know who we are. We oppose this violation, this dehumanization, when we seek self-recovery, when we work to reunite fragments of being, to recover our history.”¹⁶ My inquiry, however, goes further than recovering black gay voices, and looks to situate a distinct black queer voice—James Baldwin—as a vernacular intellectual.

Part of what vernacularizes James Baldwin is his resistance to join movements and organizations. While he was a key figure in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, his writings during the mid- to late-twentieth century cannot be adequately characterized as integrationist, nationalist, or separatist. He spoke *to* and engaged *with* all of these dominant positions on the race question, but did not conveniently ascribe to any one of them, oftentimes speaking out against them with his own unique voice. Baldwin refused to conceptualize race as a black issue, and his unrelenting appeals, critiques, and challenges to white Americans are legendary. Additionally, he rebuffed the alluring temptation to avoid questions of morality because of his sexual orientation.

While James Baldwin can be historicized in a larger black gay American literary tradition, he enters the vernacular by using the spirit of the blues, where the oral and sonic dominate, as a touchstone for his writing. Baldwin’s vernacularity incorporates something both popular—the blues—and bracketed off—the understanding and recognition of the usefulness of the blues. He uses his keen insight into the blues specialization and makes it more acceptable through his writing. For Baldwin, Bessie Smith’s lyrics and tone provided him with the tools to recreate the vernacular in new formations such as the essay and novel. Baldwin yearns to be

¹⁶ hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, p. 31.

honest in his work like Bessie who escaped “definitions by becoming herself. This,” he argues, “is the only way to become a man or a woman—or an artist.”¹⁷ Baldwin’s writing oeuvre resembles that struggle for honest self-determination. He, the vernacular intellectual, had “a contradictory function in that it is at once the marker of disjuncture...and an ironic conjoining”¹⁸ in that he spoke the language of Bessie and the blues while simultaneously being well immersed in his literary tradition’s dominant discourses and mastering the use of the English language.

The blues “matrix” is an ideal space for the vernacular intellectual. It is “a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit.”¹⁹ Baldwin need not restrict his artistic and genealogical influences in the blues matrix. The blues matrix allows for Baldwin’s intellectual thought to travel the vernacular while still intersecting with other theoretical inputs and outputs such as queer studies and literary theory. A matrix is fluid, not stagnant, and variant, not homogenous. Because there is no prescribed path for the vernacular, Baldwin is able to identify with a female-dominated artistic movement—the blues—as a male writer. In addition to the openness of cross-gender identification, the blues matrix de-stigmatizes the sexualization of Baldwin’s voice and allows for a reclaiming and rethinking of a larger black queer tradition.

Uses of Queer

The word “queer,” is invoked in this project with three meanings in mind: queer as sexuality, queer as odd, and queer as a heuristic. In regards to sexuality, queer is used to symbolize what is conceived of as “deviant” sexual behavior—including but not limited to homosexuality and same-sex desire. While this is the

¹⁷ Snead, James A. *Baldwin Looks Back*, p.141.

¹⁸ Farred, Grant. *What’s My Name*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, p. 2230.

primary term used throughout the thesis, there are moments where other taxonomies are invoked. For example, the acronym “LGBTQ” is used to describe the larger social movement advocating for sexual “rights.” The default term, however, remains “queer,” precisely because of its uncomfortable resonance. Defining sexuality should be an uncomfortable exercise. Queer is more indefinite and fluid than other categorically based terms such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual” because it does not place limitations on queer membership based on rigid notions of sexual orientation, heterosexuality, and homosexuality. Queer as sexuality is also helpful for theorizing James Baldwin as a vernacular intellectual because it “has an uneasy relationship with male/female gender binaries: in that queer is nominally ungendered.”²⁰ Baldwin is, therefore, able to more easily identify with queer female blues singers than gay Harlem Renaissance writers.

Other times queer is employed in the more traditional sense of simply meaning odd.²¹ It is sometimes used to describe a space or time that is unconventional or different. The use of queer as odd to describe one’s sexuality concomitantly labels all sexualities queer as well in the sense that they are not normal either. Since this type of queer sexuality provokes a disidentification with the heteronormative, “some straight people might be thought of as queer, whereas some gay people may be thought of as not queer.”²² Rather than fighting for the normalcy, queer seeks to destabilize the investment in the very concept of normalcy. Queer, then, can be thought of as a heuristic way of being and a point of origin from which to ask questions. This thesis attempts to present queer as a perspective of marginality or oddness and argues that it is a fruitful foundation from which to understand James Baldwin as a vernacular

²⁰ Barnard, Ian. *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory*, p. 11.

²¹ Queer as odd is used even though it is not easily separated from sexuality in the dominant sexuality studies circle.

²² Barnard, Ian. *Queer Race*, p. 11.

intellectual. While Baldwin never completely or openly embraced any sexual identity, his disidentification with the normal, along with his preoccupation with the blues, illustrate a new articulation of the vernacular and queer. Baldwin's interesting location at the intersection of these two heuristics exposes the possibility that they can, and often do, intimately exist together.

Thesis Structure

Because of Baldwin's location in different intellectual places, this thesis' necessary interdisciplinarity draws upon literary, anthropological, historical, and cultural sources. Stylistically, my writing "performs" each chapter within their larger discourses—the novel, the essay, and case law. Chapter 1 critiques the novel, Another Country, as art and is written fluidly with audible texts from black popular music in an attempt to force the reader to think sonically as well as textually. Chapter 2 explores The Fire Next Time—two of Baldwin's essays—and is more focused on rhetorical analyses. I purposely and meticulously dismantle Loving v. Virginia (388 US 1) to symbolize the tedious nature of engaging politics in the legal realm and argue against an exclusively legal approach to social movements in Chapter 3. Collectively, these chapters speak to the vernacular and James Baldwin's intervention as a queer black intellectual. Finding a traditional conclusion unimaginable, I end with a coda in order to emphasize this project's commitment to rethinking lessons learned from James Baldwin—specifically his politics of impossibility—and how contemporary figures continue his work of tapping beneath the surface.

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CHAPTER ONE

Another Country: Jimmy's Haunting Blues

Studs Terkel: As you listen to this record of Bessie Smith, Jim, what is your feeling?

James Baldwin: What struck me was the fact that she was singing, as you say, about a disaster, which had almost killed her, and she accepted it and was going beyond it. The *fantastic* understatement in it. It is the way I want to write, you know. When she says, "My house fell down, and I can't live there no mo"—it is a great... a great sentence. A great achievement.²³

A writer deeply invested in blues culture, James Baldwin looked to model his writing style after the vernacular traditions of figures such as Bessie Smith, a performer who mastered the art of understatement, acceptance, and "going beyond." In her "Back Water Blues," Bessie Smith sings about the devastation of a Mississippi flood and the loss of her home: "Backwater blues done caused me to pack my things and go/ Because my house fell down/ And I can't live there no mo."²⁴ What is "fantastic" for Baldwin is Smith's ability to transcend the depression of her material loss into a realization that she must move forward. "And I can't live there no mo" seems disheartening, but Baldwin would later comment in 1964, "she ended it in a fantastic way."²⁵ What would it mean to write like Bessie Smith—that is—fantastically, where one faces the blues "Facts of Life"²⁶ and moves beyond the lucid limits and expectations imposed by them? Under such a rubric, the line, "And I can't live there no mo," is hopeful because although it recognizes loss, the realization allows

²³ Terkel, Studs. *An Interview with James Baldwin*, p. 3.

²⁴ Smith, Bessie. "Back Water Blues."

²⁵ Baldwin, James. *Uses of the Blues*, p. 150.

²⁶ Id., Baldwin briefly lists common themes found in the blues including "work, love, death, floods, and lynchings, in fact, a series of disasters which can be summed up under the heading "Facts of Life."

for the possibility that after the storm, after the loss of her home, Smith will move onward.

James Baldwin's Another Country can be read as a blues text that is musically coded and sonically written. Every character encountered is harmonized along with their personal struggle(s), experience(s), and feelings. If the blues operate literarily as code, Baldwin fills the reader in on their conundrums by "breaking it down." Baldwin assumes the role of blues deconstructionist, creating a vernacular space where the blues haunt and even inform his writing as his characters perform Baldwin's "Facts of Life."

We are ushered through the psyches of Rufus, Vivaldo, Cass, Ida, and Eric by Baldwin as he decodes their disasters and their attempts to go beyond it—to "transcend as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal."²⁷

Baldwin queers time in Another Country: his written blues destabilize the imaginary lines between the internal and the external, the past and the present, as well as fantasy and reality. From the onset of the novel, we encounter Rufus homeless and hungry, but also preoccupied with his past, his family, friends and the meals he had eaten. After urinating on the streets as a physical release, he immediately delves back into his internal thoughts and thinks of Leona "[o]r a sudden, cold, familiar sickness filled him and he knew he was remembering Leona."²⁸ Through the physical release of urination and the thought of Leona, Rufus' mind flows backward in time to the night that they met, and leads us to their first sexual encounter—a rape—where the roles of victim and perpetrator are quite hazy. There are, indeed, clear indicators of Rufus' sexual aggression—pulling her roughly, knocking the glass down out of her hand, as well as Leona's repulsion: "pulling her body away from his touch,"²⁹ crying, and struggling.

²⁷ Ellison, Ralph. *The World and the Jug*, p. 183.

²⁸ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 6.

²⁹ *Id.*, p. 20.

As Rufus rapes Leona, however, his thoughts elucidate physical and mental torments that are at once contradictory and, at the same time, seamless. Rufus' suffering mental state forces him to be physically aggressive which ultimately exacerbates his psychological suffering. Although he "forced her beneath him and...entered her,"³⁰ it was Leona who "carried him, as the sea will carry a boat"³¹ and Rufus who was riding this sea with his "weapon."³² This double characterization of Rufus as both rider and possessor of a weapon creates an image of a terrorized rapist who rationalizes rape as acceptable because he is engaged in a sexual battle. Rufus *forced* himself to look at her face and saw a "triumphant smile."³³ Whether or not the smile was, indeed, "triumphant" is unknown, as we are limited to Rufus' interpretation. The post-rape dialogue, however, sheds light upon the ambivalent nature of the rape scene. Leona speaks the first words, "It was so wonderful."³⁴

Baldwin portrays the rape scene between Rufus and Leona in physical and mental imagery, carefully moving between exploring the motivations and dissonance of the rapist, Rufus, and blaming the victim, Leona—who can hardly be considered, by Baldwin's description, to be totally powerless, nor the only one suffering. The first sexual encounter is not only violent, but also temporally queer—the internal thoughts of both Rufus and Leona are suggestive of broader historical and stereotypical mythological figures in the American drama: "the" violent hypersexualized black male and "the" innocent white female. In his critique of "protest literature" and their shallow depictions of characters Baldwin writes,

[a]nd, indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other's slow, exquisite death; death by

³⁰ Id., p. 21.

³¹ Id.

³² Id., p. 22.

³³ Id.

³⁴ Id.

torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together.³⁵

Rufus and Leona, the racialized and gendered mythical figures torturously thrust and counter-thrust until they ultimately die. It is clear that Baldwin, as a black American writer, is haunted by the oversimplification of characters such as Rufus and Leona. Instead of ignoring the race-gender stereotypes, Baldwin allows Rufus and Leona to dominate the beginning of the novel; however, by having them die early on, he asserts his critique that these one-dimensional portrayals will not dictate his story. As James A. Dievler explains, “Rufus and Leona are doomed because they see each other as the world sees them.”³⁶ Baldwin immediately and deliberately kills these dominant mythical figures to stylistically shed the space of the mythical Negro writer from which *he* is presumed to write within and, thus, creates a new, freer vernacular space to articulate his blues.

The relationship between Rufus and Leona, which could be more accurately be described as an extended and repetitious thrust and counter-thrusting of fantastical mythology, sets the ambivalent tone for how the novel’s characters conceptualize sex and love and foreshadows the various internal and external dilemmas with which they will struggle. Rufus and Leona’s relationship and the mythical figures they represent haunt as striking specters over the characters’ personal relationships as they are drawn and repulsed to other people, replaying the early pushing and pulling of the rape in various forms. Baldwin uses that moment as a touchstone or the standard twelve-bar of his Another Country blues and attempts to illustrate how one moves beyond the “Facts of Life” toward what comes next through his characters and his writing.

³⁵ Baldwin, James. “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” p. 33.

³⁶ Dievler, James A. “Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*,” p. 174.

Life After Death: Rufus the Phantom Easy Rider, Double Consciousness & White Liberalism

And just the other day, my nigga Chris killed his self/I pray to God, that I never feel the way he felt/Where do we go when there's no help?/He figured Heaven, so he went left/Ya'll know that ain't right/Plus, he was high as a plane that same night/Shit, I probably been on that same flight/Shit, I probably had that same fight/I just kept swingin/Twelve rounds comin, bells ringin

Introduced to the game, when I was just a child/Mama love a drug dealer, straight quit her job/And took his life, and along with him, I died/And she died, we died/Then came my daughter, to my bed side/Told me daddy, don't cry, I'm alive/I look her in the eyes, and see me with no sins/But this is how the note ends

—Lil' Wayne, *Trouble*³⁷

Each death in Another Country necessitates a subsequent haunting: Leona (dead through silence, lack of social agency, and physical dislocation) haunts Rufus, Eric's relationship with Rufus (which ended) haunts his own relationship with Yves, as well as Rufus' relationship with Leona; but, it is Rufus' literal death that is the most powerful haunting spirit in the novel. It is clear that Rufus is Another Country's true phantom, true ghost, and true "easy rider." What the characters will do with this haunting is the basis of the storyline. As in the traditional 12-bar blues³⁸, the repetitious return to Rufus' death is a necessary foundation for the improvisation of the other characters' lives. The specter of Rufus is not simply a constant return to his suffering, but also offers new opportunity—a new improvisation.

To end Chapter One, Baldwin kills the main character, making it clear that the novel will not go as the reader expects. Not only will there be no "happy ending" for Rufus, there will be no *physical* Rufus for majority of the text; yet, it is clear that

³⁷ The Drought Is Over Pt. 4, 2007.

³⁸ See, generally, Patrick Neate's *Twelve Bar Blues*.

Rufus is the main character who will carry the text. Rather than ignoring this stylistic move as arbitrary, I envision Rufus' early and tragic suicide and its haunting as a commentary on the power of the past and memory *as* present. These characters are never simply living their lives in the present; the past is always, on some level, an influential component of the present. In "Trouble" Lil' Wayne raps about a friend that committed suicide and places the memory as a critical component of his present cognition. He rhymes, "Shit, I probably been on that same flight"—Rufus' flight—where the destination is suicide. However tragic his friend's solution is, Lil' Wayne improvises the narrative by asserting, "I just kept swinging" rejecting the notion that his life is predetermined. Lil' Wayne brings his deceased friend into the present as the base of his own blues, but transcends and moves forward to the hope and possibility of his offspring: "Daddy don't cry I'm alive." Memory, future, and present exist concomitantly for Wayne as it also does for Baldwin's characters and their connection to Rufus.

Rufus' haunting spirit speaks to the other characters, but especially to Vivaldo through Ida. She becomes the conduit for what Rufus has left unspoken. Ida believes that her brother's suicide is a collective failure and her very presence is a reminder of that shared responsibility. Perhaps, because of his closeness to Rufus, Vivaldo feels the guiltiest of all of Rufus' friends and, subsequently, labors most in atoning for his inaction. He confesses to Cass, "I wanted so bad to take that girl in my arms and kiss that look off her face and make her know that I didn't do it."³⁹ Vivaldo's haunting love for Rufus is complicated by his new relationship with Ida. Rufus' death transforms into a haunting opportunity for Vivaldo to confront the secrets of his past. He spends a lot of time, however, suppressing any self-discovery or self-rediscovery.

³⁹ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 113.

What binds Rufus with Ida, however, goes beyond Vivaldo and family ties. They are bound by blackness, Harlem, interracial dating, prostitution, and Vivaldo. Ida is, in many ways, a reincarnation of Rufus, and the personification of his haunting spirit.⁴⁰ In her argument with Vivaldo about Eric and Cass' affair, Ida identifies with Rufus as a black person in Harlem, New York City, America. The disagreement develops into an argument about Eric and Rufus' relationship, and Vivaldo defends Eric and contends that Rufus is not as innocent as Ida portrays him to be. Ida, however, asserts, "I never said he was a saint. But I'm black, too, and I know how white people treat black boys and girls."⁴¹ Vivaldo argues that their own relationship is evidence that she is mistaken about the nature of Eric and Rufus' relationship. She recognizes Vivaldo's innocence—an innocence that she has not been afforded as a black woman—and explains that their being together does not change the world for her, but it does for him because he is white. Although Vivaldo chose not to condemn Rufus for his maltreatment of Leona, he failed to actually understand what would compel him to beat and rape her: negatively affective double consciousness.

Speaking of what he calls "Negro American consciousness," Ellison writes, "[i]t is a product of our memory, sustained and constantly reinforced by events, by our watchful waiting, and by our hopeful suspension of final judgment as to the meaning of our grievances ... most Negroes recognize themselves as themselves despite what others might believe them to be."⁴² Ellison explicates the notion of double consciousness⁴³ for black Americans as a recognition of the self, and also a recognition of the mythical image that has come to represent the black body in

⁴⁰ Id., Outside of the relation of her new friends and lover to her brother, Rufus also haunts Ida in her ambitions as a singer. Her first public performance is in the Village with people Rufus had drummed with, and she is immediately identified as "the Kid's kid sister" by an audience member.

⁴¹ Id., p. 324.

⁴² Ellison, Ralph. *The World and the Jug*, p. 171.

⁴³ See W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 5

American society. Rufus was damagingly affected by the way he was seen—so much so, that he did not, to borrow from Ellison, recognize himself. His relationship with Leona brought all of these troubles to the forefront.

In what Baldwin calls “the big world,”⁴⁴ Rufus was acutely aware of the eyes upon him and Leona from the landlord, neighbors, children in the Village, and passersby in general who “looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm.”⁴⁵ He could feel himself outside of himself, being watched, and understood very clearly people’s disdain for his relationship with Leona. While struggling with the consciousness of himself as spectacle, Leona naively comments that he does not know himself. Rufus, however, explains: “I know who I am, all right...I’m your boy.”⁴⁶ His double-vision allows him to imagine the auction block and himself as Leona’s “boy” on that auction block.

Leona’s innocence as a white woman does not allow her to recognize how consuming negatively affective double consciousness can be. After a horrible fight with Rufus, she tells Vivaldo, “Rufus, he’s all the time looking for it, he sees it where it ain’t, he don’t see nothing else no more.”⁴⁷ Despite all of her innocence, Leona’s statement draws attention to the potential effects of a doubly conscious man who loses sight of his “true” self—outside of what the role that the world has created for him. Rufus saw himself re-enacting the myth of the black man as aggressive, violent, and hyper-sexualized. Hyper aware of his double consciousness, the world’s reflection of himself became a constant state of mind that morphed into mental illness. He recognized that something was wrong: “[s]omebody’s got to help me ... This shit

⁴⁴ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 27

⁴⁵ *Id.*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ *Id.*, p. 40

⁴⁷ *Id.*, p. 58.

has got to stop ... I guess there *is* something the matter with my head,”⁴⁸ but he was unable to disentangle himself from the image he accepted from the “big world.”

Queer Escapes: Vivaldo’s Trouble With Normal

The performative nature of blackness is evident throughout the text. Rufus performed the mythical role of the violent black man who both desires and hates white women. Vivaldo’s obsession with blackness is interesting, as well. He uses configured racialized spaces to wear blackness. When looking for prostitutes Vivaldo enjoyed the eyes watching him in judgment and yearned for the experience of double consciousness: “He enjoyed this, his right to *be* being everywhere contested; uptown, his alienation had been made visible ... He had felt more alive in Harlem.”⁴⁹

Vivaldo’s preoccupation with the other aligns with his issues with normalcy. Although he is white, male, and seemingly heterosexual, Vivaldo queers blackness so that he can live queerly in black spaces. By queering Harlem as a black space where whites should not be, he attempts to shed his normalcy by imposing himself there. Similarly, he seems to have sexual relationships with black women in an attempt to take up the role of the queer white man who would rather have sex with black women than white women. The issue here, of course, is that white men having sex with black women—especially with economic complications—is not new, abnormal, or queer. Vivaldo does not think that deeply about the historical treatment of black women by white men in the United States. He is more concerned with the black eyes that judge him when he walks the streets of Harlem looking for black women to have sex with or jazz clubs to drink in, and is less concerned with how black people really feel about him. Vivaldo pleads to Rufus and Ida that he wants to understand, but is unwilling,

⁴⁸ Id., p. 66-7.

⁴⁹ Id., p. 132.

until the very end of the novel, to sacrifice his innocence for that understanding. He engages intimately *and* artificially with blackness, as a space of sexual deviancy, but seems stunned that he is not treated exceptionally and trustingly by black people.

Vivaldo is representative of a type of white liberalism that immerses itself in black life and culture. Rufus calls Vivaldo's liberalism unique because of its treacherous nature⁵⁰. Vivaldo seems to be willing to sacrifice his whiteness—however inconceivable that may be—despite the actual social realities of race. His treachery is made possible by his innocence. For instance, after being attacked at an Irish bar in New York City, Vivaldo is blinded by his innocent view of America's race relations, and the societal limitations Rufus faces as a black man who wants to help a white friend. Rufus senses his innocence and was afraid “for Vivaldo, who knew so little about his countrymen.”⁵¹ Rufus knew that he could not take Vivaldo to the hospital, and that his white girlfriend, Jane, could. For Vivaldo, racism stops once the racial lines are crossed by friendships and love. He does not understand that racism could still haunt a relationship despite the intentions of the parties involved.

Throughout the novel, Vivaldo struggles to understand that personal relationships are not isolated from larger structural forces. When Ida tries to explain to him how black boys and girls' bodies can be used by white people, his immediate response is to use his relationship with blackness and black people as evidence that there is no structural manipulation of black bodies. He naively ponders, “After all this time we've been together...you still think that?”⁵² Keen to Vivaldo's innocence by way of second-sight, Ida responds, “Our being together doesn't change the world, Vivaldo.” Vivaldo holds on to his innocence: “It does ... for me”, but Ida explains,

⁵⁰ Id., p. 36, “Rufus had depended on and trusted Vivaldo—depended on him even now...Vivaldo was unlike everyone else that he knew...it was only Vivaldo who had the power to astonish him by treachery.”

⁵¹ Id., p. 35.

⁵² Id., p. 324.

“That...is because you’re white.”⁵³ Despite Ida’s views to the contrary, Vivaldo remains obstinately grounded in his ignorance until it is involuntarily snatched out of him by the shattering of his image of Ida. When she reveals her incriminating past sexual experiences with other white men, including Ellis, Vivaldo is finally able to purge himself of his innocence⁵⁴ and understand his queer escapes from the normal identities that haunt him—his race and sexuality.

Often operating as a sort of liberal oracle in the text, Cass tries to make sense of an ambivalently queer story Vivaldo tells her. Unlike Vivaldo, Cass tries to move beyond his surface acknowledgment of a experience where he and his friends forced a young boy they perceived to be queer to go down on all of them before they beat and robbed him. She ruminates,

It was not expressed...Perhaps it was because Vivaldo’s recollections in no sense freed him from the things recalled. He had not gone back into it—that time, that boy; he regarded it with a fascinated, even romantic horror, and he was looking for a way to deny it.⁵⁵

She anticipates:

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.⁵⁶

Vivaldo’s plight is his failure to unlock the secrets housed in his dungeon. He engages in a “queer escape” of sorts, where he may allow himself to recall past experiences of same-sex desire, but prohibits himself from reflecting upon what they may mean for

⁵³ Id.

⁵⁴ “She was stroking his innocence out of him,” p. 431.

⁵⁵ Id., p. 112.

⁵⁶ Id., p. 112.

him in the present or for his future. When Rufus seeks refuge from Vivaldo after living in the underworld for about a month, he asks, “Have you ever wished you were queer?”⁵⁷ Vivaldo responds by saying that he was not queer but used to think and wish he were. He fails to delve deeper into what those feelings mean, and claims to be “stuck” because he is not. Rufus poses the question to Vivaldo, but it seems to be more of a question to himself; and, while we know little about Rufus’ past, we know enough about Vivaldo’s to find his quick dismissal of being queer suspect.

Vivaldo’s escape from queerness is ambivalent; he experiences queer feelings, but continually distances himself from a queer identity. He was attracted to Ida’s grin because it reminded him “of a mischievous street boy,” and escapes queerness by appreciating her eyes which displayed a “feminine mockery.”⁵⁸ However, if we recall the first description of Ida we will remember that her eyes and smile resembled those of Rufus. Vivaldo strips Ida of her femininity and renders her androgynous which is reminiscent of the treatment of black women’s bodies during American slavery and functions to sustain the historical de-gendering of the black female subject. Instead of confronting his same-sex desire, for most of the novel, Vivaldo projects those desires onto what he believes to be the next best thing—Rufus’ sister, Ida. Ida seems to be, at first, nothing more than a displacement of Vivaldo’s desire. When questioned by Cass about his motivations for pursuing Ida, Vivaldo is menaced by his sexuality and jokes, “Maybe I better cut the damn thing off,”⁵⁹ foregoing, once again, the opportunity to question his ambivalence about queerness.

Experiencing writer’s block with his novel, Vivaldo distracts himself by looking at the girl across the street with another man, which causes him to think back to the loveless sexual acts of his own past. Although he begins his flashback with the

⁵⁷ *Id.*, p. 51.

⁵⁸ *Id.*, p. 103.

⁵⁹ *Id.*, p. 97.

black prostitutes he paid for in Harlem, his thoughts, ultimately, lead him to think of Rufus. Through female bodies, Vivaldo is able to confront his desire for Rufus. He recalls when they “balled chicks together”⁶⁰ and he asks, “[a]nd what had it done to them?”⁶¹ This question leads him to think of yet another homoerotic experience with a black soldier while he was in the service. As in the case of his orgies with Rufus, “their by-play had very little to do with” the girl that was present.

Despite his mixed feelings about his queer memories, Vivaldo often had nightmares about the black soldier, as he would later have about Rufus, but cannot decipher why the soldier sought revenge in them. The game he and the black soldier played was, similarly, played by he and Rufus with serious consequences: “And yet how much, as it turned out, had each kept hidden in his heart from the other! It had all been a game, a game in which Rufus had lost his life.”⁶² Was Rufus attempting to end the game when he posited the question, “Have you ever wished you were queer?” on the night of his death? Did Vivaldo force the game to continue with his dishonest response? How would Rufus have reacted if Vivaldo had shared and discussed his queer experiences, instead of trying to escape them? Vivaldo never asks himself these questions; he looks forward to his meeting with Ida as he continues to use female bodies help him with his same-sex desire.

It is not until the image of Ida is tainted and she is no longer able to function as an adequate escape because of her sexual relationship with Ellis that Vivaldo begins to acknowledge his need for male attention. When he is sure Ida is cheating, Vivaldo thinks of Rufus and repeatedly contemplates calling Eric because he wanted to be comforted by a man. At a bar, he finds a girl to flirt with and considers having sex

⁶⁰ Id., p. 134.

⁶¹ Id., p. 134.

⁶² Id., p. 133.

with her, but when he thought of Rufus “all desire left him.”⁶³ After barhopping and hanging out with old acquaintances, he ends up at Harold’s house where he finally gets the male attention he desired. Harold makes sexual advances toward Vivaldo, but he is unable to bear it. With same-sex attractions on the surface of his mind, Vivaldo is unable to completely deny it but chooses to continue to escape them. He tells Harold, “It’s been too long”⁶⁴—at once acknowledging and refusing his desire. “[W]ith [his] hand on his cock and Harold’s head on his chest” he knew “that: yes, something *could* happen” and comes clean about his fantasies “of the male mouth, male hands, the male organ, the male ass.”⁶⁵ He does not have sex with Harold, but does hold him as he sleeps. Because Ida and the haunting spirit of Rufus lead him to become deeply invested in love, Vivaldo rejects his naked homosexual desire for Harold, male body parts, and loveless sexual encounters. He would not fully allow the expression of his same-sex desire again until he has the opportunity to express it with someone that he loves—Eric.

Fittingly, Eric and Vivaldo came to recognize their love for each other through Rufus. Vivaldo confesses he failed to hold Rufus when he knew that he needed it. Vivaldo was discouraged from reaching out to Rufus by his own queer ambivalence. He knew “it had to be a man,”⁶⁶ and that he was the only man that Rufus could have depended on at the time, but he was not there during Rufus’ most vulnerable moment. Eric, less afraid and more honest about his sexuality than Vivaldo told him, “[i]f I had been there, I’d have held him.”⁶⁷ Ironically, Vivaldo needed a man who loved him, and Eric was there for Vivaldo as he had refused to be for Rufus. Indeed, it seems that

⁶³ Id., p. 301.

⁶⁴ Id., p. 314.

⁶⁵ Id., p. 315.

⁶⁶ Id., p. 342.

⁶⁷ Id., p. 343.

Vivaldo began to learn how to accept his queerness, and his willingness to hold Harold seemed to speak back to the haunting reality that he had evaded Rufus' call for help.

The exploration of Vivaldo's escape from his presumed neutral heterosexual whiteness—what he has long associated with what is normal and expected—is an interesting way for Baldwin to write queerly. Vivaldo seems to embody a truly queer sexual identity or, more precisely, a lack thereof. He seems heuristically queer because he comes to recognize how inappropriate the rigid categorical lines of homosexuality and heterosexuality can be.

As Julian B. Carter explains, “the fact that ‘whiteness’ claims to be ‘normal,’ that is, neutral and natural and universal, does not make it so.”⁶⁸ Whiteness and heteronormativity is no more “normal” than other categories. Vivaldo began to understand that it was his investment in neutral whiteness and heterosexuality that menaced his relationship with Rufus⁶⁹. On the night of Rufus' suicide, Vivaldo chose to reconnect with his white ex-girlfriend, Jane, instead of making sure that his estranged friend was well. It is not surprising, then, that the descriptions of Rufus' final moments alive were filled with feelings of alienation even amidst a large number of people. After leaving Vivaldo with Jane, he observed people near the door of the bar but “felt as removed from them ... as he might have felt from a fence, a farmhouse, a tree, seen from a train window.”⁷⁰ As he rode the subway and experienced human interaction with the worker at the turnstile “something began to awaken in him, something new; it increased his distance; it increased his pain.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Carter, Julian B. *The Heart of Whiteness*, p. 29.

⁶⁹ His notion of neutral whiteness also, I argue, allowed him to believe that he could queer blackness and black spaces and inhabit them.

⁷⁰ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 83.

⁷¹ *Id.*, p. 84.

Once on the subway, he observes the segregation of people and the “isolation cell into which they transformed every inch of space they held.”⁷²

Rufus felt overwhelmingly alienated because the human presence had begun to mean so little. Each person he encountered was as distant as inanimate objects. They were not living with each other; rather, they were just going through the motions of human contact. After noticing that he lived in a world of isolation, where people treated their interactions with each other in the most impersonal and inhumane ways, he decides to kill himself. In those final moments, he felt closer to nature than he did to humans—“He was black and the water was black;”⁷³ he engaged in conversation with the environment—as the “wind tore at him,” he screamed and thought of Eric, Ida, and Leona, and he gave himself to the “Godalmighty bastard” by allowing the wind to take him to the water.

⁷² Id., p. 85.

⁷³ Id., p. 87.

Take Me To The Water

*To ba fe lo weh omi lo- malo
Toba fe sobeh omi lo- malo
To ri ba ngbona omi lero lero
Tomo ba ngagda omi lo- malo
Tobi ba bwi nao homi lo- malo
Ko sohun tole se ko ma lomi- o*

If you wan go wash- water you go use
If you wan cook soup- water you go use
If your head be hot- water it cool am
If your child dey grow- water you go use
If water kill your child- water you go use
Nothing without water

Fela Kuti, *Water No Get Enemy*⁷⁴

Water is the first thing in my memory. The sea sounded like a thousand secrets, all whispered at the same time. In the daytime it was indistinguishable to me from air. It seemed to be made of the same substance. The same substance which carried voices or smells, music or emotion.

—Dionne Brand⁷⁵

Water is a central stylistic trope that Baldwin uses in Another Country to guide his characters through memories, emotions, and new terrain. The first chapter of Book Two: “Any Day Now” begins with a new (geographic) country—France—and introduces new characters into the world(s) of the text. We are literally accosted by an introduction of Eric. The first line reads, “Eric is sitting naked in his rented garden.”⁷⁶ The water begins to guide us through the new landscape of France, Eric, and Yves: “[T]he garden overlooked the sea,”⁷⁷ where Yves swam. We learn of the extent of their relationship (two years), the new challenge for their relationship (a dislocation to America), details Yves’ mother, her experiences, and his resulting contempt for her. There is, then, another reference to water via Yves body: “[Eric] put his lips to Yves’ shoulder and tasted the Mediterranean salt.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Kuti, Fela. “Water No Get Enemy.” *Expensive Shit*.

⁷⁵ Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return*, p. 8.

⁷⁶ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 183.

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Id.*, p. 191.

After tasting the salt from the water, Eric flashes back and thinks of what he would be returning to once he reached New York. For Eric, water becomes the first thing in his memory. Before thinking of his future journey Eric must look back. The taste of the salty Mediterranean Sea guides his memory as if the water pushes him out through the Strait of Gibraltar squeezing through the southernmost parts of Spain and the northern coasts of Morocco—flowing across the Atlantic Ocean onto the shores of the United States which leads him, ultimately, to think of Rufus and how he “had made him suffer, but...had dared to know him.”⁷⁹ Haunted by Rufus’ spirit, Eric is able to move beyond the suffering he experienced to fonder memories that they shared, and he recalls Rufus’ physical characteristics and intimate behaviors that he grew to know and love.

Eric traveled through Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic to Harlem, New York, by way of the spirit and memory of Rufus. Gilroy argues, “[t]he idea of diaspora might itself be understood as...a utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in their interarticulation with racialised being.”⁸⁰ Gilroy’s metaphor of the Black Atlantic offers an alternative approach to think about time as more than a linear construct and takes into account the spatial elements that are also embedded in the concept of time. Eric’s memory of Rufus embodies this fluidly moving conception of time. He carries the memory of Rufus with him—or, perhaps, the Rufus carries Eric through memory—across the Atlantic making his haunting spirit trans-Atlantic. Baldwin’s decision to invoke the Atlantic suggests that he is coming into consciousness as a trans-Atlantic intellectual. Whereas “Gilroy’s black Atlantic seems equally resistant to victimizing and sexualizing its mariners, as if both impulses

⁷⁹ Id., p. 192.

⁸⁰ Gilroy, Paul. *Black Atlantic*, p. 198.

were too much part of colonial discourse to warrant sustained attention,”⁸¹ Baldwin queers the Atlantic in Another Country by using water as a fluid and sustaining force that enables him to discuss sexuality. There is no escaping the water for Baldwin. As Fela Kuti eloquently sings, “water you go use.” It is a sustaining force for all that is living and Baldwin references the water to sustain his novel and keep it alive.

During his mental journeys across the Atlantic Ocean to his older life with Rufus and back to his present life in France, Eric notices that Yves reminded him of Rufus and he thinks back to the rainy day when Cass informed him that Rufus was dead. We are guided out of Eric’s flashback by another reference to water. Eric says, “Let’s go inside. I think, maybe, I’d like to take a shower...I’m beginning to feel sticky.”⁸² Water, here, is need for a cleansing of the self, and Eric’s subsequent internal dialogue exhibits that it signifies more than a physical cleansing, and also alludes to the confrontation and reliving of the memories in his sexual past. Once in the shower, as “the water came crashing over him,”⁸³ Eric thought back to the history of his same-sex desires. We are taken back to his home state, Alabama, and learn of his love for his nanny’s husband, Henry, his queer gender expression and performativity, and the “shedding of his innocence.”⁸⁴ Unlike Vivaldo, Eric’s innocence was shed early on because he divested himself from the power of categorical normalcy.

Eric stepped out of the shower, got dressed, and sat down on a chair overlooking the sea. While gazing at the water, he flashed back to the memory of his black childhood friend, LeRoy. He recalled the struggle for a language that captured

⁸¹ Tinsley, Omise’eke Natasha. *Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic- Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage*, p. 196.

⁸² Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 194.

⁸³ Id., p. 196.

⁸⁴ Id., Realizing “that everything he did was wrong in the eyes of his parents, and in the eyes of the world,” p. 199.

what he felt towards men: “it had no name, no name for him anyway, though for other people so he had heard, it had dreadful names.”⁸⁵ For Eric, “[i]t had only a shape and the shape was LeRoy.”⁸⁶ Fixed notions of sexuality seemed to never have made sense to Eric. The “dreadful names” which were juxtaposed against what was normal did not influence how he chose to approach his sexuality. In this flashback, water also guides the description of Eric’s first sexual experience. Staring into the stream, Eric proposes that he and LeRoy have sex since they had already been rumored to be doing so and “with the stream whispering in his ear,”⁸⁷ Eric discovered his physical desire for men. After remembering the whispering words and guidance of the stream, Eric flashes forward fifteen years to the present, and while “overlooking a foreign sea,”⁸⁸ he ponders how he can come to grips with that revelation he had back then and looks to the sea for whispers of advice.

As Eric and Yves lay and look out into “the still, black sea,”⁸⁹ Yves begins to talk about his past as a street boy and how Eric saved him from the world of prostitution. Eric delves back into his thoughts as Yves speaks with Madame Belet.⁹⁰ As he “looked out over the yellow, winking lights along the shore ... an unspeakable despair swept over him.”⁹¹ He began to think ahead to the day when Yves would no longer need him and leave. He thinks about what that would mean for him and if he would return to the loveless relationships he experienced before he allowed himself to love Yves.

⁸⁵ Id., p. 203.

⁸⁶ Id., p. 203-4.

⁸⁷ Id., p. 206.

⁸⁸ Id.

⁸⁹ Id., p. 208.

⁹⁰ Their maid and cook.

⁹¹ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 210.

Eric thought back to consummation of their relationship.⁹² Fittingly, their hotel had overlooked a stream. The water murmurs as Yves calls Eric's name and inquires about where he should sleep. Eric looks at Yves face and saw "the lover who would not betray him, his first lover"⁹³ and heard the murmur of the stream again. Eric's memory is disrupted by Madame Belet's entrance and the sea in Yves' face vanished. Eric's is jolted back into the present and he and Yves prepared to make love for the last time⁹⁴ in the haven of their French home and bed. "[T]he terrible floodwaters of time"⁹⁵ were overtaking their haven in the same way that the water from a flood had destroyed Bessie's home in "Back Water Blues"—"And I can't live there no mo."⁹⁶ The sound of Yves' breath was "heavier than the far-off pounding of the sea"⁹⁷ and when it was over, "[t]he sound of the sea returned,"⁹⁸ and they fell asleep lulled by its pounding. Water takes on various guises, but retains its sustaining characteristics throughout the novel.

There are other moments where water is used as a guide for the reader through Another Country, but none are more salient and powerful than the chapter that introduces Eric and Yves. The water guides us through a refreshing change in how we have seen relationships and sex described thus far. The other couples—Rufus and Leona and Ida and Vivaldo—struggled to know each other and that struggle was projected onto their abilities to make love to each other. Eric and Yves did not seem to be battling each other sexually, or looking to find each other through sex. They exposed themselves to each other's nakedness beforehand by confessing their love and desire. The water, as a guide, not only carries us through this new conceptualization

⁹² Id., p. 220-3.

⁹³ Id., p. 222.

⁹⁴ Id., p. 225-7.

⁹⁵ Id., p. 225.

⁹⁶ Smith, Bessie. "Back Water Blues."

⁹⁷ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 226.

⁹⁸ Id.

of love and making love; but also offers a cleansing of the dirty and unloving way we have seen other characters act out their sex lives.

Vernacular Space(s): Bessie, Fluidity, & Baldwin's Commitment to the *Fantastic*

The water flows through the novel as it would flow through life. It is everywhere and in every country—in America, France, the underworld, Harlem, the “big world,” the personal, memory, future, and in love. Water streams through all fictive and physical countries as a force that is necessary for the very survival of the characters, and as a vehicle through which Baldwin can navigate their everyday lives. Rufus goes to the water for his death; and yet, ironically, water breathes life to so much more throughout the novel.

Baldwin's use of water as a guide is a part of his attempt to write like Bessie sang the blues. It offers fluidity and a way to transcend an experience and move past. Water flows, it does not stop. Whereas the utilization of water is a more figurative attempt for Baldwin to write musically, his direct quotation of and references to music and song also help to provide the foundation from which Baldwin speaks through his characters.

Four days after coming back from France, Eric is at Cass' house for a party; the living room is empty but Bessie Smith's *Shipwreck Blues* is playing. Smith's voice “hurled him, with violence, into the hot center of his past”⁹⁹ as she sang the closing words of the song: *It's raining and it's storming on the sea. I feel like somebody has shipwrecked poor me.* Smith forced Eric to confront his past life in America before he had escaped to France. He compares the water near Cass and Richard's house to the Mediterranean, and the breeze reminded him of the murmur of

⁹⁹ Id., p. 232.

Yves' voice. His estrangement from New York City is "comforted by the beat of Bessie's song."¹⁰⁰

The music allows Eric to come to terms with the reality of the present as part of the past. Bessie sings a line from *Long Road: It's a long road, but I'm going to find an end*. Cass comments that he seems much happier and he, subsequently, thinks of Yves, but does not verbalize to Cass that he has fallen in love with him and misses France because of him. The music continues: *And when I get there, I'm going to shake hands with a friend*. What good is a friend who cannot be talked to honestly? Eric refers to Yves as a "guy I know"¹⁰¹ and vaguely explains that he advised him to come back.

In this moment, the music and lyrics occupy a space in the background that is at once present and invisible, and allows for the queering of time and tenses in the present moment. As Ralph Ellison poetically explained:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music.¹⁰²

Bessie Smith is the invisible force that sets the queer beat of time that Eric slips into and looks around. Sometimes Eric is behind. When Cass questions Eric about the possibility that he would return to France, Smith articulates what Eric wants to say but cannot say to Cass: *Weeping and crying, tears falling on the ground*. Eric slips into the cracks and thinks back to his past with Yves and their haven in France. He thinks

¹⁰⁰ Id., p. 233.

¹⁰¹ Id., p. 234.

¹⁰² Ellison, Ralph, *Invisible Man*, p. 8.

of how, presently, as time stands still, he misses Yves' footfalls beside him. Shifting temporally ahead of time he realizes Yves will be in New York by opening night, which helps him feel safe in the present. Smith repeats: *Weeping and crying, tears falling on the ground*. He misses Yves face and longed to tell Cass about him but did not share. Smith, then, sang a line from *Long Road: When I got to the end, I was so worried down*, and Cass comments on how sure Eric seemed of himself because of his aura but also, I believe, due to his inevitable success as an actor. Eric is shocked by this observation, for now that he is embarking on the end (a reputable career) he is "worried down."

Smith goes on to sing: *You can't trust nobody, you might as well be alone* and Eric looks out over the water and asks Cass how Rufus was right before he died. She mentions that he was involved in an abusive relationship with a girl from Georgia and Smith sings: *Found my long lost friend, and I might as well stayed at home*. Eric is startled by this new information and empathizes with Leona because he is also a Southern native and remembers how Rufus had made him suffer. If Rufus represents Leona and Eric's "long lost friend," it could be argued that they would have been better off staying at home in the South than falling in love with Rufus up North. As Eric is given this new information, Rufus' face appeared before him, and he was able to see Rufus' face before he gave himself to the water—the same "water that stretched before him now."¹⁰³ He felt another pain "knocking at his heart"¹⁰⁴ and he knew that it would enter one day in the future and would remain there forever.

Smith sang a line from *In the House Blues: Don't let them blues in here. They shakes me in my bed, can't sit down in my chair*, which ends Eric's flashbacks and flashforwards. The invisible woman, Smith, has one last word: *The blues has got me*

¹⁰³ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 238.

¹⁰⁴ Id.

on the go. They runs around my house, in and out of my front door, which caused Eric to ponder what he was trying to prove by keeping up sexual relationships with women in the past while he was involved with Rufus. Eric slipped into the breaks of Bessie Smith's blues as if it were located in himself and looked around for answers. He was sometimes ahead—thinking of the future (Yves), sometimes behind—thinking of the past (Rufus), but always enthralled in the queer time put forth by Bessie Smith—the invisible force that dictated the beat to which he would think about his life.

The blues operated as coded language for Eric. Unable to bring himself to speak with Cass about how he really felt about Yves, Rufus, and returning home, he dialogued with the music in his thoughts. This is an example of a broader stylistic move, on Baldwin's part, to situate music (as he did water) as an essential thread that holds together his blues text. They both operate as unspeakable and, perhaps, invisible necessities, coded throughout each moment.

Baldwin introduces Another Country with a quotation from Henry James that articulates the illegibility and insufficiency of naming and language:

They strike one, above all, as giving no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated by human use...abysmal the mystery of what they think, what they feel, what they want, what they suppose themselves to be saying.¹⁰⁵

With this epigraph, Baldwin sets the tone for the novel and seems to imply that upon completion, we may be left with unanswered questions, lingering thoughts and interpretations, and, perhaps, outright confusion. Rufus, Vivaldo, Leona, Cass, Richard, Ida, Eric, and Yves navigate their lives by trying to articulate those mysteries of themselves: what they think, feel, want, and suppose themselves to be saying; but,

¹⁰⁵ Id., p. 1.

the meaning of their experiences and the language that can accurately capture their situations is quite complicated.

I have offered my interpretation of Another Country as a blues text aiming to situate Baldwin as a vernacular intellectual located in the traditional discipline of literature. His acute attention to the more popular forms of art, most clearly the blues, seem to influence his writing style and content. Baldwin necessarily uses the space of the vernacular to expose the intimate links of sexuality, love, race, friendship, politics, gender, and nation—various “countries.” These countries are given shape and meaning, by the characters existence within in those varied spaces. Another Country is Baldwin’s attempt to *fantastically* write a blues novel—to as Bessie Smith recognized in “Back Water Blues” that she “can’t live there no mo’”—transcend the hauntings of the past and go beyond.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Fire Next Time: The Souls of Baldwin and Us

*Down in Atlanta, GA, under the viaduct ev'ry day, drinking corn and hollerin'
hooray/Pianos playing till the break of day/But as I turned my head, I loudly
said, "Preach 'em blues, sing them blues"/They certainly sound good to me/I've
been in love for the last six months and ain't done worrying yet/Moan'em
blues, holler them blues/Let me convert your soul/'Cause just a little spirit of
the blues tonight/Let me tell you, girls, that your man ain't treating you
right/Let me tell you I don't mean no wrong/I will learn you something if you
listen to this song/I ain't here to try to save your soul, just want to teach you
how to save your good jelly roll*

*Going on down the line a little further now/There's many a poor woman
down/Read on down to chapter nine,/woman must learn how to take their
time/Read on down to chapter ten,/taking other women's men, you are doing a
sin/Sing'em, sing'em, sing them blues/Let me convert your soul/Now one sister
by the name of Sister Green/jumped up and done a shimmy you ain't never
seen/Sing'em, sing'em, sing them blues/Let me convert your soul*

Bessie Smith, *Preachin' the Blues*¹⁰⁶

James Baldwin expands his role as blues deconstructionist in Another Country to that of minister by literally preaching the blues in The Fire Next Time. In “Preachin’ the Blues,” Bessie Smith makes a distinction between salvation and conversion, drawing a line between the traditional notion of saving souls in the Christian church and the more *fantastic* idea of conversion that blues culture entails; however, she retains the air of spirituality in both. The blues conversion, does not necessitate saving for Smith. Instead, she resists the infantilization of her audience and seeks to convert adults’ souls instead of saving them. Love and solidarity are at the core of Smith’s satiric sermon. The Fire Next Time, too, is a political preaching

¹⁰⁶ Smith, Bessie. “Preachin’ the Blues.”

blues about love, morality, and spirituality, which captures Baldwin in one of his most performative moments as a preacher preaching the blues.

At first it might seem more difficult to imagine The Fire Next Time—a publication of two of Baldwin’s essays—as a blues text than it would be to understand Another Country—a novel—as a literary illustration of a particular type of blues because of the creativity associated with works of fiction. Angela Davis, however, explains, “the blues spirit constantly contests the borders between ‘reality’ and ‘art.’”¹⁰⁷ While Baldwin made a tremendous effort to create a distance between his role as a creative writer and his responsibilities as an essayist and “race-man,” an examination of his oeuvre offers insight into how Baldwin’s texts are, often, in conversation with one another. The combination of his essays, that presumably represent “reality” best, and creative writing, which are associated with what we conceive of as “art,” seem to represent a larger non-chronological Baldwin project that is a work in progress. His work seems to be less dictated by genre, and more focused around a set of ideas. It is in this way that Baldwin enters the vernacular space—antagonizing his audiences by not staying in his “proper place” as if there is a “proper” place. This vernacular space mediates the space between the creative and the essay and challenges the very conceptualizations of these realms. It is a fuzzy space, an antagonizing space, where there is no script to follow.

Speaking Queer Silences: Trespassing Race

In this vernacular space Baldwin’s “only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as to never to rest on any one of them.”¹⁰⁸ Being careful not to equate Baldwin’s personal life with his creative writing, a

¹⁰⁷ Davis, Angela. *Blues Legacies & Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁸ Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*, p. 146.

theorizing of the realm in which Baldwin's work moves as vernacular allows for a blurring of the distinctive line between his novels and essays, as well the expectations of responsibility, agency, fantasy, and legitimacy that come along with rigid categorizations of the essay versus creative writing. Can we imagine Another Country as a text that is reflective of "reality" and appreciate the artistic qualities of The Fire Next Time? More importantly for this project, can we imagine reading these texts together?

If we cannot imagine these texts together, we would be suggesting that the Baldwin who authored Another Country put on a mask and became someone else—a "race man"—to write The Fire Next Time. While he may make some concessions and avoid explicitly taking up issues about sexuality in his essays, what do we make of the deliberate silences where we can read queerly? Can the public intellectual ever be just "public?" Historically, there has been a thin line between the private and public domain in the African American tradition. There is a history of politics based on the personal, even the "person"—that is, the literal body.¹⁰⁹ Instead of focusing on the speech act as a liberating route out of the closet that exposes the authenticity of the author, Baldwin challenges the very notion of a closet in reference to his essays by explicitly writing about sexuality in his creative works. A text is, as Barthes explains, "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." Queer examinations of silence, then, of The Fire Next Time can offer new insights into Baldwin's larger intellectual project and help reconstruct the Baldwinian queer archive.

¹⁰⁹ Many black feminists such as Audre Lorde, for example, have written extensively on the personal as political.

Invoking what Dagmawi Woubshet calls, “homoerotic religiosity,”¹¹⁰ the homoerotic acts as subtext in The Fire Next Time, and trespasses the racialized space of Baldwin’s essays through his articulation of power. Opening “Down at the Cross” with a (debatably) satirical poem on the “white man’s burden” by Kipling alongside a hymn about salvation, Baldwin immediately suggests a link amongst power, religion, and imperialism¹¹¹ when he explains,

The struggle, therefore, that now begins in the world is extremely complex, involving the historical role of Christianity in the realm of power—that is, politics ... Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels.¹¹²

Unlike in Smith’s conversion narrative, Christianity has taken on a paternalistic role in the life of adults. Baldwin describes Christian theology as ideology gone spiritually mad, and exposes how it has been perverted to support American structural power and how that plays out, along racial lines, for black Americans’ possibilities and agency. He explains, “the collision between cultures—and the schizophrenia in the mind of Christendom—had rendered the domain of morals as chartless as the sea once was, and as treacherous as the sea still is.”¹¹³ Just as Leona, personified as socially constructed female whiteness, and her womb are depicted as a violent body of water,¹¹⁴ The Fire Next Time takes into account how Christianity has been used to justify a white ahistorical innocence.

¹¹⁰ Woubshet, Dagmawi. Class Lecture; See also Jose Saramago’s *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* for another literary critique of Christianity.

¹¹¹ See Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, generally, for a detailed analyses of the connections among power, religion, and imperialism.

¹¹² Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 45.

¹¹³ Id., p. 47.

¹¹⁴ Baldwin, James. *Another Country*, p. 21. “as the sea will carry a boat: with a slow, rocking and rising and falling motion, barely suggestive of the violence of the deep.”

Baldwin highlights the hypocrisy of Christian virtue and morality by exposing the historical role the Christian church has played as a tool of power. Exploding the binary of the sacred and the secular, Baldwin describes his experience on the threshing-floor as a pagan release, at once solidifying the body as a part of the spiritual (as opposed to something to be denied), and also presenting this release as a spiritual and un-Christian rite of the black church. From that vantage point, Baldwin is able to discuss body politics, and allows us to read a critique of heteronormativity along those lines.

The Politics of Trespass: Relocating the Body & the Soul

Go Tell It On The Mountain is a semi-autobiographical and confessional text in which Baldwin tells the story of a black American teenager going through a religious crisis. In the essay, “Down at the Cross” it becomes clear that the character, John, in Go Tell It On The Mountain is evocative of a fourteen-year-old James Baldwin. While experiencing his spiritual crisis in The Fire Next Time, Baldwin confesses, “I did not understand the dreams I had at night, but I knew that they were not holy. For that matter, I knew that my waking hours were far from holy.”¹¹⁵ We can decode that these unholy dreams are about same-sex desire and masturbation vis-à-vis John. Just as “blues songs were never considered the personal property of their composers or the performer,”¹¹⁶ Baldwin’s earlier novel is not constrained to the historical moment in which it was created. As part of his larger project, Baldwin utilized a personal anecdote in order to strengthen his creative writing. It is, therefore, not merely a decoding of the queer silences in The Fire Next Time, but also a reliving of the text itself inside of another text. When Baldwin goes on to discuss how the

¹¹⁵ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 35.

¹¹⁶ Davis, Angela. *Blues Legacies & Black Feminism*, p. 136.

pimps knew “that I had not yet begun to suspect where my own needs... could drive me” and that he “was even lonelier and more vulnerable than ... before,”¹¹⁷ Baldwin seems to be referencing his sexual needs, with no distinction between types of sexuality—homosexual or heterosexual.

He critiques the “sexless little voices”¹¹⁸ of heteronormativity, and posits that to be sensual is to really live and to be “present in all that one does.”¹¹⁹ It seems quite easy to read sexuality into his critiques of morality and his articulation that nobody understands power more than those who do not possess it. When he speaks of home having a “diabolical ring”¹²⁰ for maltreated WWII soldiers, it raises the question, “how do people with same-sex desire contend with ‘home’?” Indeed, a home that is not hospitable is not much of a home. Baldwin contends of the black American tradition:

this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.¹²¹

We can think here, for a moment, about the suffering past of queer American men and women, and while it may not be able to be usefully compared to black American history, there is, too, something beautiful in the struggle for sexual minorities to assert their human spirit.¹²² Queer and black persons have and continue to suffer, collectively and individually and, yet, history shows that both groups have and continue to assert their right to exist as human beings. Rather than argue for some sort

¹¹⁷ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 38.

¹¹⁸ *Id.*, p. 42.

¹¹⁹ *Id.*, p. 43.

¹²⁰ *Id.*, p. 54.

¹²¹ *Id.*, p. 98.

¹²² That is not to say that there are not individuals who find themselves in both black and queer circles with distinct histories. See Cathy Cohen’s *Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens*, generally, for a discussion of the overlap of black and queer identities and the potential of queer politics.

of racial or sexual exceptionality, one can be “proud of these people not because of their color [or sexual orientation] but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and their beauty.”¹²³ Baldwin, like Smith, is advocating for a conversion that does not undermine the maturity of his fellow citizens. According to his blues philosophy, maturity and suffering is a necessary part of human identity. Like Bessie’s “Preachin’ the Blues,” Baldwin’s “own compositions philosophically juxtaposes the spirit of religion and the spirit of the blues, and contests the idea of the incontrovertible separateness of these two spheres.”¹²⁴ His blues perspective preserves anguish as a necessary human feeling in the struggle for the soul. The invasion of the secular into the sacred—as is the case in “Preachin’ the Blues” and The Fire Next Time—is not actually an invasion at all. Baldwin, like Bessie, “establishes the realm of the blues as spiritually coexistent with and simultaneously antithetical to Christian religious practices.”

Discussing the “politics of trespass,” Elizabeth Povinelli explains how contemporary sexuality studies have:

refused to sequester, to ghettoize....queer issues to a subset of social life. The best of these trespass studies have demonstrated decisively how discourses and practices of gender and sexuality are critical to the maintenance of liberal and illiberal forms of power and domination and are at the governmental heart of capitalism, secularism, civil society, and new and old religiosities.¹²⁵

By refusing to keep race “still,” and locating the racial problem outside of black Americans’ bodies into the bodies and minds of all Americans, Baldwin anticipates contemporary sexuality trends by moving against the ghettoization of race. Baldwin exposes the structural nuances of power and trespasses race by speaking queer silences

¹²³ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 101.

¹²⁴ Davis, Angela. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, p. 129.

¹²⁵ Povinelli, Elizabeth. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*, p. 12.

of sexuality. At the same time, he critiques the racial undertones and legal implications of a perverse Christian theology—trespassing the boundaries of the sacred by uncovering its connection to power. Black queer studies trespass at home and challenge the spaces where sexuality is assumed to be a peripheral matter.

Going against the assumption of sexuality as marginal, Baldwin takes up the issue of the body as flesh. Instead of distancing the self from the fleshy body, he discusses sensuality as an important human characteristic:

To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread. It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it.¹²⁶

By releasing the body, which enables sensuality, from the realm of “flesh as sin,” and relocating the body in the realm of the sensual, Baldwin creates a new type of sin—the sin of not living, the sin of not being *present*. The racialized and sexualized body, then, can be better understood under the rubric of the body as sensual. The American black body has historically been rendered abnormal and hypersexualized, in order to preserve normative ideas of sexuality which, in turn, preserve larger structural social constraints on black bodies.

Discussing the myth(s) of blackness, most notably the mythology of the hypersexualized nigger, Baldwin explains the paradox of mythology in “Everybody’s Protest Novel”:

¹²⁶ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 43. See also Grassi, Joseph A. *Loaves and Fishes: The Gospel Feeding Narratives*, generally, for details on the Jesus Christ and the Eucharist.

[w]e take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed.¹²⁷

American mythology has the power to betray historical reality because the social constraints on racialized and sexualized bodies are tangible and real. By iterating sensuality as the ideal way to humanly live, Baldwin creates a space outside of the “cage of reality.”

If the body is a part of sensuality, logically, sexuality is, too. It is here where we can fill in more of Baldwin’s queer silences. Learning from his vernacular blues ancestors, Baldwin “disputed the binary constructions associated with Christianity” and “blatantly defied the Christian imperative to relegate sexual conduct to the realm of sin”¹²⁸ in The Fire Next Time. Moving the sensual body outside of the constraints of the church trespassed the sacred. Behind the Christian church’s restriction of the body is a fear of sensuality. It is for that reason that “[i]n one sense, the fear of homosexuality perpetuated by the church is related to a generalized fear of sexuality.”¹²⁹ The Christian fear of the body as flesh is proscriptive of all sexual behavior; however, homosexuality is often targeted most because it has historically been more closely associated with the unclean body.¹³⁰ Baldwin trespasses the sacred realm of the Christian church by raising taboo questions associated with a Christian identity. Religion, more specifically the Christian church, is a collection of bodies that are brought together to forge an identity. Baldwin challenges that identity by inquiring about Christian *bodies* and what controls them. He does not outright reject

¹²⁷ Baldwin, James. “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” p. 32.

¹²⁸ Davis, Angela. *Blues Legacies & Black Feminism*, p. 123.

¹²⁹ Id., p. 131.

¹³⁰ Although most anti-gay rhetoric focuses on devaluing heterosexual marriage and family, I am suggesting that the rationale behind Christian heterosexism is something much deeper.

or discredit Christianity; instead, he challenges us to think how Christianity is used to oppress and restrict the body.

Fighting for Language: Sticks and Stones May Break Bones and So Can Words

The “Baldwin sentence,” was muscular, compelling, flexible, musical, original—his own invention. But it was what he said that finally hypnotized us with such powerful seduction.

—Quincy Troupe¹³¹

Baldwin writes vernacularly by taking a variety of discourses into consideration and his sentence structure is, as a result, densely and thoroughly conceptualized. What is most striking, and beautiful, is his untiring use of provoking words and concepts such as the body, freedom, love, home, and spirituality. Baldwin is not afraid to claim ownership and articulate meanings of words that are powerful, but whose meanings and imagery have become hollow.

Baldwin does not shy away from questions of morality. He, instead, conceptualizes a different morality to challenge the exclusionary, rigid, and overwhelmingly perverse Christian morality that dominates American culture and politics. His appropriation of American ideals such as liberty, freedom, and democracy is one of the reasons his politics is difficult to pin down. Rather than rejecting everything American and Christianity, Baldwin makes a case for a reformed conceptualization of Americanness and spirituality without all of the mythology and innocence that pervades the idea of America. Yet, he is keen to pay attention to how others use these words. In his letter to his nephew Baldwin warns about “the reality which lies behind the words *acceptance* and *integration*,”¹³² encourages him to “go

¹³¹ Troupe, Quincy. *James Baldwin: The Legacy*, p. 25.

¹³² Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 8.

behind the white man's definitions"¹³³ and inverts the political discourse surrounding integration and acceptance by arguing that it is the blacks that must accept their white brethren "and accept them with love."¹³⁴ Baldwin is able to envision a new American spiritual politics through love.

The realm of love is the battleground for Baldwin. What does it mean for Baldwin to locate love at the center of cultural-political discourse? Because Baldwin's love is a fierce, honest, and rupturing, it can also be considered an affective love. The signifier, "affective," situates love as an intense feeling that is distinguished from mere cognition and still preserves it as a state of consciousness. To love something, or, in this case, someone, is to make oneself vulnerable. In The Fire Next Time, Baldwin asks his nephew, and black people in general to make themselves vulnerable by accepting whites with love. The ultimate (patriotic) duty is to shatter the American myth in the minds and actions of Americans. For Baldwin, the denial of black Americans' humanity is at the core of America's racial mythology. He explains,

Colour is a great American myth...It's part of the great American masturbation. You see it's easy to label a man this or that, maybe 'nigger,' and the label permits you to do all kinds of monstrous things to him because he's no longer a man; he's a label...The old nigger is just something in people's minds.¹³⁵

American mythology is pathological and is not based on any reputable rationale other than power.

Affective love moves beyond feeling and consciousness and denotes a commitment to action—a constant rupturing of the ideas and fantasies to which many

¹³³ Id., p. 9.

¹³⁴ Id., p. 8.

¹³⁵ Hall, John & James Baldwin. "James Baldwin, A Transition Interview," p. 22.

Americans cling. Povinelli's work on intimacy is helpful for us to understand love as rupture:

The *intimate event*, as opposed to *intimacy*, is simply the way in which the event of normative love is formed at the intersection—and crisis—of these two discourses.¹³⁶

The two discourses through which the crisis of intimacy emerges are the autological subject(s)—the locale of the individual—and the genealogical society—the space of social constraint. In this crisis, there is the potential for rupturing love.

Love conceptualized in terms of affect and rupture moves away from an understanding based on crude dichotomies of mind/body, individual/society, and feeling/action. The height of love—including religious love—arrives at the point of rupture. Baldwin is clear:

I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.¹³⁷

Baldwin's distinction is understandable in relation to love as it is presented in Another Country and Giovanni's Room. In the former, Vivaldo's struggle for love requires an affective daring to know;¹³⁸ in the latter, Giovanni exposes love as filth and stink.¹³⁹ In neither case is there any illusion or promise of infantile happiness. Thinking them together alongside Baldwin's affective rupturing love in The Fire Next Time, provides

¹³⁶ Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Empire of Love*, p. 4.

¹³⁷ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 95.

¹³⁸ See *Another Country*, especially passages on Vivaldo's struggle for love i.e. p. 296: "Love was a country he knew nothing about. And he thought, very unwillingly, that perhaps he did not love her."

¹³⁹ See *Giovanni's Room*, especially pgs. 141-2 where Giovanni cries to David, "You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love. You want to *kill* him in the name of all your lying little moralities. And you—you are *immoral*."

a fuller picture of Baldwin's broader conceptualization of love. In *Another Country*, "Baldwin links self-knowledge with knowledge of another by way of the experience of love. The inability to understand oneself becomes an inability to love."¹⁴⁰ Daring love as a state of mind requires a commitment to understand the object and the labor that goes along with it—the rupture. The filth of love reclaims the physical fleshy body and its purities and impurities as love. This feeling—love—is located at the core of Baldwin's plea for a new mode of life. Collectively, the content of Baldwin's oeuvre exhibits an affective rupturing love and commitment to the individual, the self as individual, and the larger society.

For Baldwin, America's societal problems do not lie in America's founding principles, but in Americans' failure(s) to properly understand and execute these ideals and values. He is committed to the notion of America as an exceptional state, but this does not limit his ability to restructure ways of thinking politics. While still ascribing to Founding Fathers rhetoric of Life, Liberty, Equality, Humanity, Opportunity, and Truth, Baldwin still challenges within those frameworks, thus, making his politics awfully difficult to pin down.

Baldwin addresses the failure of the liberal American state by placing black Americans at the center of his discussion on American democracy and, subsequently, using traditional American liberal ideals to gauge American democracy's success as it relates to black Americans. By evoking freedom, he plays on American sentimentality and patriotism without, himself, being sentimental or ascribing to narrow-minded patriotism. Baldwin is, in essence, speaking in the dominant American language. It is tempting to read this move as an unwillingness to imagine an entirely new way of thinking politics or, a way out of the conundrum of proposing a radically new framework in the face of traditions that have become realities. Instead, it reads as a

¹⁴⁰ Dievler, James A. "Sexual Exiles: James Baldwin and *Another Country*.", p. 174.

disarticulation of liberal ideals from within the ideology of American democracy. Baldwin's disarticulation of America's founding principles is not a displacement of these ideals into a new space. His disarticulation of rhetorical American principles charges that their true meanings have yet to have been felt or actualized. They, like love, have often been used in an infantile sense. Also, like love, the aim of freedom is not happiness.

America is not "let off the hook," so to speak, in The Fire Next Time because America is the focus of Baldwin's address. Instead, America is evaluated in new ways with the same standard language—the expectations are higher. For Baldwin America cannot, for example, be excused from its larger role in world politics. A comparative analysis between democratic and racial relations within the United States as opposed to the rhetorical, empathetic, and military assistance that America offers abroad in the name of democracy is an interesting way to test the sustenance of American democracy.

In 1961, Baldwin tells his nephew, "You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon."¹⁴¹ America has not made good on its promise of freedom. For Baldwin, freedom has a cost, and it is the relinquishment of American mythology and white hegemony. "Freedom is hard to bear"¹⁴² because it is so closely tied to a renewing love. The rupture in this love is hard to bear. Baldwin disarticulates the dominant American vocabulary and forces us to break away from hollow meanings of words such as love and freedom and rethink them as more profound ideals for which to strive.

It is precisely because of his reluctance to surrender the language of traditional American ideals that Baldwin maintains a seemingly atypical political stance.

¹⁴¹ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 10.

¹⁴² Id, p. 88.

Although Baldwin was deeply distrustful of institutions, he was also deeply invested in complicating American liberalism's championing of individual liberty:

Individual freedom and social constraint . . . contribute to the ways that intimacy in these two worlds is apprehended and what alternative practices of intimacy are found in each, especially as these modes of intimacy move us beyond the choice between freedom and constraint.¹⁴³

For Baldwin, it seems impossible to choose between freedom and constraint. It is in that vein, that collectivity based on something as alienating and personal as same-sex desire can be best understood. Social constraint violently creates spaces for deviancy. Baldwin uses liberalism against itself, by choosing not to articulate a politics based on an imagined collective. Instead, he asserts that social constraint has created social spaces that were previously nonexistent, which robs individuals of their liberty.

Writing the Fight: Queering Morality with Spirit

I could say, and they would both understand me: Don't you think Bessie is proud of Aretha?

—James Baldwin¹⁴⁴

Baldwin reminds us ... that subjects who can live in and experiment with environments of numbing harm must be made, nurtured, and grown out of the very environments that are poisoning them.

—Elizabeth Povinelli¹⁴⁵

In the war for/of language, ideological terms operate as moving targets¹⁴⁶ and the meanings behind these terms can be transformed by those in power and created

¹⁴³ Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Empire of Love*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ Baldwin, James. "Malcolm and Martin," p. 202.

¹⁴⁵ Povinelli, Elizabeth. *Empire of Love*, p. 89.

into a normative schema. The dominant discourse of morality controls how morality is perceived and who can authentically invoke it. Baldwin finds power by demystifying the dominating language and exposing its failures. Nowhere is this more beautifully done, than in his work on morality. It is the Holy Spirit and spirituality that Baldwin is most unwilling to surrender. He imparts, “[t]he transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended.”¹⁴⁷ By writing spiritually and soulfully, Baldwin attempts to fill the spiritual void and extend that spirit past Sunday mornings. In The Fire Next Time, Baldwin overtly references W.E.B. DuBois: “‘The problem of the twentieth century,’ wrote DuBois around sixty years ago, ‘is the problem of the color line,’”¹⁴⁸ but the spirit of the text expands upon DuBois’ work on the soul.

In addition to his DuBoisian concern for Americans souls, Baldwin expands DuBois’ notion of double-consciousness in The Fire Next Time by theorizing that it often cuts across race, where the spirit of the individual experiences time in queer ways. Americans are faced with the past—sometimes repressed, avoided, and/or invented—and the present reality where the effects of the past are felt. Like love, this temporal space is queer—in the sense that it is odd or non-normative—because it is located in the psyche and soma of the collective as well as the individual. Is it not in the pro-sensual, anti-dogmatic intellectual’s best interest to fight for access to use idioms of morality, and to even utilize it against those who have popularized and exploited it so well? “Moral,” like other words, has become a dirty word that progressives have shied away from, perhaps to their own detriment.

It is important to recognize the historical moment in which we live. The past is important, but it is no more important than the present, nor is it important if it is not

¹⁴⁶ Id., p. 14.

¹⁴⁷ Baldwin James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁸ Id., p. 103.

approached in relation to the present. A recognition of the historical moment in which we live also involves responsibility for that historical moment and consideration of the inevitable future. Is it not immoral to live in the present without giving proper attention to the past? Baldwin takes up the issue of historical perspective and responsibility in his disagreement with The Nation of Islam's call for a separate nation. Baldwin writes,

The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.¹⁴⁹

This acceptance of the black American past extends to white Americans, as well. Baldwin calls for a return to an acceptance of the morally bankrupt practices of American slavery, which would lead to a rupture in the American sense of identity and belonging. Keeping the true American past salient and integral to American daily life is a necessary step towards any conceivable progressive future.

Baldwin desires a conceptualization of America that is attuned to the fantasies, mythologies, and realities of its past as well as the new manifestations and complexities that have arisen from it. He recognizes that America is in a “serious ‘crisis in hegemony’”¹⁵⁰ and recognizes that it is simultaneously the moment to battle for a different ideological morality and build a consensus that uses morality to attack the structural inequalities that a fantastic America enables—including racism and even heterosexism. By capitalizing on the American anxiety of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the fear of the mythical nigger¹⁵¹ and the immoral queer by speaking silence, Baldwin offers an anti-fascist alternative politics. He uses the most intimate

¹⁴⁹ Id., p. 81.

¹⁵⁰ Hall, Stuart. *Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 33.

¹⁵¹ See, e.g., Chapter 1's discussion on Rufus as the mythical “nigger.”

of mediums—the self—in the most vulnerable manner—the perpetual act of love. Yes, the enemy is everywhere, but it is not merely located in black or queer bodies. The enemy is located within the self and victory against the enemy is found on the personal level.

Hall warns:

We are up against the wall of rampant and virulent gut patriotism. Once unleashed, it is apparently unstoppable...because it feeds off the disappointed hopes of the present and the deep and unrequited traces of the past.¹⁵²

Baldwin's strategy is not to stop "gut patriotism," but to make patriotism mean something valuably progressive. Rather than avoid the past, he engages with it and exposes it. In order to make his politics more accessible, Baldwin's The Fire Next Time abandons the traditional liberal tendency to privatize morality, and makes his theory of affective rupturing love more accessible by incorporating values and terminology that have a certain American purchase. Since morality is an unspoken code for action that governs everyday lives, it is worth rethinking and engaging this category. Baldwin disarticulates morality and argues against its internal restrictions where the fleshy body is inherently sinful. He redefines the paradigm of morality by releasing the body from the institution of the church and into daily life.

That's Reverend Baldwin to You...Yes "YOU"

How does Baldwin preach through writing? At the core of this question is the relationship between Baldwin, the preacher-writer, and the reader-congregation. There are moments in The Fire Next Time where Baldwin creates a space of call-and-response. He checks in on the reader-congregation through deliberately placed clauses

¹⁵² Id., p. 73.

or questions to remind them that the preaching-reading experience requires a response. Describing the coming of age of the girls in his neighborhood, Baldwin writes, “They began to manifest a curious and really rather terrifying single-mindedness ... something implacable in the set of the lips, something farseeing (seeing what?) in the eyes.”¹⁵³ Baldwin preaches to the audience-congregation about “something farseeing” and calls “seeing what” for a response. By posing a question, Baldwin destabilizes the usual passivity of the reader and by leaving the question open-ended, forces a response. It is up to the audience-congregation to speculate what these girls saw. The moment of forced speculation is precisely the response.

Later in the text Baldwin calls out to his audience using a parenthetical missive. In the midst of explaining the ambivalence he felt about his responsibilities as a writer and public intellectual to meet with Elijah Muhammed, Baldwin clarifies:

I knew the tension in me between love and power, between pain and rage...But this choice was a choice in terms of a personal, a private better (I was, after all, a writer); what was its relevance in terms of social worse?¹⁵⁴

In the space of the parenthetical, there is Baldwin turning towards the reader-congregation as if to ask for forgiveness for attending the meeting. In this moment, we can see that Baldwin is not only a preacher-writer, but he is also performing the role of the public intellectual where the intellectual’s behavior is under scrutiny by his constituency. He justifies his decision to go by including the experience in the space of the preacher-writer perhaps arguing that the difference between the secular writer and the sacred preacher is acute given the role of the black church in politics.

Like a preacher, Baldwin speaks directly to the reader by continuously using fluctuating pronouns like “we the blacks,” “we the relatively conscious whites and the

¹⁵³ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁴ Id., p. 61.

relatively conscious blacks,” and “*you*.” Constantly naming and indicating the reader as a major part of the text, Baldwin seeks to make the text-sermon more of a collaborative encounter. His audience is the focus of the address. However, textually speaking, there is nothing more stylistically preacher-like, than his consistent references to himself—“I”—and his use of the personal narrative as trope.

The Fire Next Time is written with a certain historical awareness that borders on the didactic, which makes the moments where Baldwin shifts to narrative mode more compelling. The title of the first essay, “My Dungeon Shook: *Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation*” suggests a deeply personal and vulnerable insight into Baldwin’s family life. Rather than simply talking the talk of vulnerable love, Baldwin invites the reader-congregation, like lovers, into his world. Even the second essay, “Down at the Cross: *Letter from a Region in My Mind*” implies a willingness, on the behalf of Baldwin, of personal exposure. Baldwin’s nephew could be any black American nephew. After portraying himself as uncle, Baldwin goes on to stylistically use a language of kinship and familial ties throughout the second letter as if we were all children of God—or, at least, children of love.

Like Martin Luther King and others in the black prophetic tradition, Baldwin “really could make his words sing”¹⁵⁵ in his writing. Baldwin “sings” in his elongated paragraphs, often loudly going on for more than a full page. He leaves the constraints of the typical grammatically correct essay. The final section of The Fire Next Time, where he discusses where his congregation should go from here, is the most poetically written part of the text. Seeming to speak spiritually from his soul to ours Baldwin asks that “we...like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Reider, Jonathan. *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me: The Righteous Performance of MLK, Jr.*, p. 135.

¹⁵⁶ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 105.

He calls on a new, utopian American collective sensibility—an identity that it formed around the human paradox of life and death by professing,

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return.¹⁵⁷

Sexuality could easily be added to the list of imprisoning identities that work to deny life and death. Baldwin's poetic and spiritual tone allows us to consider other taxonomies that blind us to death. There is no love for Baldwin without the recognition of death, but the social order is invested in promoting categorizations that deny *living* fully in order to earn the right to die. The "root" of America's trouble is its obsession with Americanness—a costly obsession—that evades one's responsibility to life.

¹⁵⁷ Id., p. 92.

Rethinking the Impossible

There is nothing more crucial, in this respect, than Gramsci's recognition that every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction; that there is no destruction which is not, also, reconstruction; that historically nothing is dismantled without also attempting to put something new in its place.

—Stuart Hall¹⁵⁸

Baldwin dwells in fuzzy areas and it is in that vernacular space that he offers his best insight. This space is a space of opportunity for rethinking. It is a space where the writer/reader paradigm can exist and perform the roles of preacher/congregation, where love is at the core of American transformation, where queerness can act as a heuristic that speaks silence, the body as flesh can be spiritual, and where the impossible can be demanded. Baldwin posits love and sensuality as key elements of American reconstruction. He recognizes that the terrain is changing and will change with America's future in the balance.

The Fire Next Time is a warning of what is to come if we do not critically engage beyond the legal to more intimate spaces. A rethinking of the impossible involves new cultural fronts that have not been considered political battleground before—such as the novel, the personal, and the affective emotions of human beings. Hall explains, “[w]hen a conjecture unrolls, there is no ‘going back.’ History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment.”¹⁵⁹ New articulations are needed in new moments—and there will always be new moments.

By imagining a social order where love is at the center, Baldwin recognizes that he is asking for the impossible. He concedes, “I know that what I am asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can

¹⁵⁸ Hall, Stuart. *Hard Road to Renewal*, p. 164.

¹⁵⁹ *Id.*, p. 162.

demand.”¹⁶⁰ A commitment to political love despite the recognition of the impossibility of its achievement is intriguing. For Baldwin, America cannot possibly move forward if Americans will not honestly look backward and commit to a complete reorientation of the personal and public lives that they live. “Jacques Lacan tells us—if anyone needs reminding—that love is an exercise in failure.”¹⁶¹

If queer is thought as more than a nonnormative category, and more heuristically as a nonnormative process as well, it allows for a politics of impossibility where one is oddly comfortable with perpetually questioning the heteronormative. America’s hegemonic structure dominates beyond the legal realm. A black queer politics can learn from the lessons of Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time blues and seek alternative ways to fight for full representation in American society.

¹⁶⁰ Baldwin, James. *Fire Next Time*, p. 104.

¹⁶¹ Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, p. 21.

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CHAPTER THREE

Lessons From James Baldwin: Demystifying the Legal, Rethinking Black Queerness

The openness of the blues realm—its repudiation of taboos of all sorts—is rendered possible by virtue of the fact that the blues always decline to pass judgment. Their nonjudgmental character permits ideas that would be rejected by the larger society to enter into blues discourse.

—Angela Davis¹⁶²

Because of his commitment to an intimate approach to politics, the blues realm is an ideal framework for James Baldwin to situate himself. Beyond his creative ability to write like Bessie Smith sings in Another Country and preach two sermon-essays in The Fire Next Time, the blues offer James Baldwin a vernacular space of intellectual freedom. One of Baldwin's major interventions in American politics is his rigorous critique of and serious engagement with the American past and its haunting in the present. His articulation of the importance of the specter of the American past involves bringing up American taboos and erasures that have been methodically evaded in America's rhetoric on democracy. Rather than being concerned with judging America's past, Baldwin is more interested in remembering that past to understand the present. Judgment alone, for Baldwin, is not a complete productive political process.

James Baldwin's politics of love as impossibility is important in that it allows us to imagine a black queer intellectual tradition. To demand the impossible, as Baldwin does, is to accept the discomfiting reality that one's political work is never quite done. Embedded in the idea of queer is the impossibility for normalcy—racial, sexual, or otherwise. Black queer politics, then, place the racial and sexual impossibilities of normalcy at the center of the political process. In other words, black

¹⁶² See Davis, Angela. Blues Legacies & Black Feminism, p. 133.

queer politics, like Baldwin, demand new ways of thinking. Both imagine a new politics of impossibility that reclaims the spirit and intellectual labor of movements that have, in some way or another, rejected or repressed blackness or queerness—one for the sake of the other. This politics, like the blues, would also “categorically refrain from relegating to the margins any person or behavior”¹⁶³ and revisit, rethink, and rewrite these imperfect spaces as legitimate parts of history.

In the spirit of Baldwin, this concluding chapter attempts to “look back” at historical legal American precedent as it relates to race and sexuality—most specifically marriage because it is currently the dominating issue in the mainstream LGBTQ discourse—and deconstruct certain idioms that have been and continue to be taken for granted as truths. It is, therefore, an engagement with the past as it effects the present that uses Baldwin as a methodological guide. This chapter is also, however, a basis for a future conceptualization of black queer politics and what that may entail.

For example, a black queer politics would recognize that the United States’ has a long legal history of violating due process of law¹⁶⁴ including the authorization of slavery, disregard for lynching, and approbation of Jim Crowism. Baldwin recognized America’s troubled history of inequality despite its commitment to democratic society. For that reason, The Fire Next Time is a warning of the dangers of relying too heavily on the government and the courts to radically change racist informal and formal practices. Has the LGBTQ movement learned from such a critique?

¹⁶³ *Id.*

¹⁶⁴ Due process, generally, is a term for the notion that laws and legal proceedings must be fair for all citizens.

Marriage in Black(s) Face(s): Framing, Radicalism, and Politics

In 2006, I was approached by a colleague and asked to assist in making “a case for same-sex marriage to the African-American community.” Where does one begin to posit such an argument? Naturally, I retreated to my experience(s) as a black non-heterosexual female who was raised in the Christian church, who has been faced with the question of marriage. I pondered what marriage meant to me as a female, as a black American, as a non-heterosexual, as a person with Christian leanings, and as all of these things at once. If my colleague anticipated a quick response, she was hugely disappointed.

Same-sex marriage in the black context, evokes historical American memories of structural limitations placed on black Americans such as slavery and anti-miscegenation law—memories that the mainstream LGBTQ movement only consider superficially—if at all. If one is to make a case to the black American community for same-sex marriage, one must remain cognizant of other personal identities that may together form one being. Separating the black LGBTQ constituency’s race from their sexuality is not helpful in presenting same-sex marriage as an important issue for the larger LGBTQ community. To force that separation is to essentialize and homogenize what is *not* LGBTQ, but also to reinforce the notion of neutral whiteness. A discourse on same-sex marriage should consider race—specifically how the black American community relates to marriage in general. Surely my experience is not *the* “black experience;” but, it is through my perspective that I am able to speak to the possibility of a case for same-sex marriage in the black American community.

To begin the case for same-sex marriage to black Americans, we must first conceptualize and historicize challenges for access to the institution. For the most part, the current mainstream LGBTQ agitation for legitimate inclusion into American society frames rights generally, and marriage most explicitly, as a medium for

inclusion. Rather than highlight the ways in which same-sex couples are excluded from American legal and social life, LGBTQ advocates attempt to normalize non-heterosexuality and same-sex marriage as it relates to heterosexuality and different-sex marriage. Situating same-sex couples as a part of society, as opposed to a marginalized and ostracized group, may have severely hindered legal efforts to persuade the judiciary that non-heterosexuals should qualify as a suspect class¹⁶⁵ and that heightened scrutiny should be appropriate.

Pro-same-sex marriage advocates find themselves balancing between suspect class and fundamental rights arguments. If they ascribe to the notion/myth that marriage is and has been a part of all Americans' heritage—a heritage that gays and lesbians¹⁶⁶ belong to—and adopt the rhetoric that it is rooted in our traditions as a unique institution, same-sex marriage advocates run the risk of weakening a suspect class argument. On the other hand, by arguing that non-heterosexuals are a suspect class, same-sex marriage advocates ultimately hurt the fundamental rights claim—as it is currently conceptualized—that non-heterosexuality and non-heterosexuals are not only normal, but also members of an American tradition and culture. Simply put, can same-sex marriage advocates have it both ways?¹⁶⁷ Sound legal arguments demand a clear argument whether non-heterosexuals are ostracized or not, and whether they are recognized citizens or treated “suspiciously” by the American government.

As homosexuality gradually becomes more accepted, a new normal homosexual identity arises. It retains all of the normative aspects of American

¹⁶⁵ Suspect classification is a classification of groups that meet a series of criteria (the group's characteristics are immutable, the group shares a history of discrimination, the group is politically impotent, the group is a discrete and insular minority), suggesting they are likely the subject of discrimination and are unable to compete in mainstream politics.

¹⁶⁶ I use the terms “gay” and “lesbian” here as opposed to queer because I am referring to the mainstream and politically powerful sector same-sex advocates who prefer and utilize the traditional discourse of “gay” and “lesbian.”

¹⁶⁷ In Loving v. Virginia 388 U.S. 1 (1967), civil rights advocates were able to achieve both an equal protection victory and a substantive due process victory. However, the Supreme Court has changed dramatically since then and is arguably much more conservative.

hegemony excluding heterosexuality, but including the notion of neutralized whiteness. In this space of homonormativity¹⁶⁸, “[r]egulating homosexual difference in order to claim coherence as a public citizen is part of the homonormative subject’s entrance into racial privilege.”¹⁶⁹ The homonormative subject, then, cannot be a racialized subject (i.e. must be white) to truly engage in the intersection of the heteronormative and the homonormative; or, more appropriately, the consumption and co-option of non-heterosexuality by heterosexuality.

An Exercise in the Legal: Deconstructing Loving v. Virginia

For purposes of making a case for same-sex marriage to black Americans, let us put aside the racialized effects of a homonormative LGBTQ rights agenda, and consider, for a moment, a historical analysis of marriage as it relates to black Americans. Pro-same-sex marriage litigation forces us to examine the historical treatment of blacks’ legal marital abilities. Strategically speaking, pro-same-sex marriage advocates are deeply invested in Loving v. Virginia 388 U.S. 1 (1967), an interracial and integrationist American Supreme Court case. It is one of the most cited cases in pro-same-sex marriage litigation, but it is, at its root, a case about race.

Loving is not only a landmark case in regards to the extension of marriage opportunities, but it is also an important context in which to examine American race relations, race construction, legal history and strategy. Two Virginia residents—Richard Loving, a white man, and Mildred Jeter, a black woman—evaded Virginia’s miscegenation laws and got married in Washington, D.C. where there was no such prohibition on marriage between persons of different races. After returning to their

¹⁶⁸ See Warner, Michael, Trouble With Normal, generally.

¹⁶⁹ See Ferguson, Roderick, “Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity” in Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology at 59.

Virginia home in 1958, the Lovings were arrested by their county sheriff in their bedroom in the middle of the night for violating Virginia's miscegenation law.¹⁷⁰

The Lovings were indicted¹⁷¹, plead guilty, sentenced to one year in jail, and encouraged to leave the state to avoid serving their prison sentence by the Circuit Court of Caroline County.¹⁷² *Id.* The Lovings, indeed, left Virginia, and returned to Washington, D.C. where they lived with other relatives and their children.¹⁷³ In 1963, the Lovings filed a motion with the Virginia trial court that their sentences be relinquished. One year later, still awaiting a decision on their motion, the Lovings also filed a class action with the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia charging that Virginia's anti-miscegenation statutes were unconstitutional. The state judge denied their motion, and the Lovings proceeded to appeal to the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia. This intermediate court upheld the constitutionality of Virginia's antimiscegenation laws and the Lovings appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

The Loving Court interestingly takes up the issue of race and how it should be constructed and situated. The Court highlights other laws in Virginia's anti-miscegenation statutory scheme, of which the Lovings were neither convicted nor charged. Section 20-54 of the Virginia Code, *Intermarriage prohibited; meaning of term 'white persons,'* and Section 1-14 of the Virginia Code, *Colored Persons and Indians defined*, defined racial categories and statutorily created a dichotomy of "whites" and "coloreds" with legal implications. *Id.* at 5, n. 4. The court goes on to provide a historical account of miscegenation and highlights the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 as an important moment in the history of miscegenation law. They explain,

¹⁷⁰ See Peggy Pascoe, Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of "Race" in Twentieth Century America, 83 J. of Amer. Hist. 44, 64.

¹⁷¹ The Lovings were indicted on felony charges which triggers criminal records.

¹⁷² *Id.* at 2.

¹⁷³ *Id.* at 65.

“[t]he central features of this Act ... are the absolute prohibition of a ‘white person’ marrying other than another ‘white person.’” *Id.* at 6. It is telling that the “central feature” of the Act and Virginia’s anti-miscegenation laws—laws about race mixing—was principally concerned with the marital activity of white persons and not particularly concerned with the marital activity of non-white persons except in relation to white persons; neither did the law explicitly ban *sexual intimacy* between individuals of variously defined races. Virginia’s anti-miscegenation laws were intent upon defining the legitimacy of children and which children would and would not be considered “bastards.” The Loving Court, rather briefly, calls the “racial integrity” argument into question in a footnote declaring “[w]e need not reach this contention because we find the racial classifications in these statutes repugnant to the Fourteenth Amendment.” *Id.* at 11, n. 11. The fact that they thought it necessary to address, however minimally, the inherent white supremacist components of anti-miscegenation laws speaks volumes. It can be argued that the Loving Court recognized a changing trend in race relations and, therefore, wanted to rule in a manner that did not contradict this shift. They are keen to note that many states had repealed their anti-miscegenation laws, *id.* at 7, n. 5, implying that should they rule Virginia’s anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional, Virginia would not be the only state where interracial couples could marry. Furthermore, the Loving court was, in a way, following precedent set by Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka 347 U.S. 483 (1954) a few years earlier that formally desegregated public schooling.

The state had two main arguments. The first contended that “the Equal Protection Clause, as illuminated by the statements of the Framers, is only that state penal laws containing an interracial element as part of the definition of the offense must apply equally to whites and Negroes in the sense that members of each race are punished to the same degree” *id.* at 8-9 (a very narrow reading of the Fourteenth

Amendment). Assuming the state’s interpretation of the Equal Protection Clause, they also claimed that rational basis was the appropriate scope of review and the courts should “defer to the wisdom of the state legislature in adopting its policy of discouraging interracial marriages” because the “scientific evidence is substantially in doubt.” *Id.* at 8. The court held that: “the clear and central purpose of the Fourteenth Amendment is to eliminate all official state sources of invidious racial discrimination in the states,” in effect saying that denying black persons the right to marry white persons was contrary to the central purpose of the Fourteenth Amendment; “racial classifications...be subjected to the ‘most rigid scrutiny,’ which continued in the tradition of solidifying racial categories as a suspect class that needs to be legally protected; the Equal Protection Clause protects against laws “restricting the freedom to marry solely because of racial classifications;” that “the freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men,” in essence, re-legitimizing marriage as a defining social unit; and that marriage was a “basic civil right[] of man,” which triggers a high level of scrutiny in a Due Process claim under the Fourteenth Amendment *Id.* 10-12.

The language used throughout the decision regarding race was quite strong, functioning to construct race as a legally unique category that deserved heightened judicial review—serious legal protection. For instance, in response to the state’s equal application theory of the Equal Protection Clause, Justice Warren, writing for the majority, contends, “the fact of equal protection does not immunize the statute from the *very heavy burden* of justification which the Fourteenth Amendment has traditionally required of state statutes drawn according to race.” *Id.* at 9 (emphasis added). The tone throughout much of the dicta regarding race also suggests a clear effort to situate race as a unique and special category.

In response to the state’s argument that the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment did not intend for it to deem miscegenation laws unconstitutional, the court explains that “although these historical sources ‘cast some light’ they are not sufficient to resolve the problem; “[at] best they are inconclusive.” *Id.* at 9. It seems clear that all nine justices agreed (Stewart in judgment) that the legislative history of the Amendment and the framers’ intent(s) was not the final word in regards to the legal treatment and protection of racialized groups. The American Constitution is situated, here, as a “living constitution,” and the justices avoid “originalist” arguments of a virtually static American Constitution.

Given the valuable lesson of indeterminability and legal interpretation Loving offers, why today, then, is there so much compulsive adherence given to the idea of judicial restraint and deference to the state when state policy clearly affects certain categorized groups? Why are no other groups granted constitutional protections with such vigor? And, more importantly, what are the advantages and disadvantages of a ruling such as Loving?

The Loving decision, especially in the last two holdings (marriage as a vital personal right and a basic civil right) that deal with the Lovings’ due process claim, moves away from merely protecting against the historical racialization of marriage vis-à-vis antimiscegenation laws, towards establishing and reaffirming how marriage is legally conceived. The Court’s compulsive concern for tradition and individuality is clear when they hold that the “freedom to marry has *long been* recognized as one of the *vital personal rights* essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness.” *Id.* at 12 (emphasis added). The Court claims to have “consistently repudiated ‘distinctions between citizens solely because of their ancestry,’” *id.* at 11, another tradition that

Loving allegedly continues to follow.¹⁷⁴ The tradition of using individual claims for a more communal *reality* is also at work in Loving as the freedom to marry—a practice that necessarily involves more than one person—is defined as a *personal* and subsequently individual right. The value American government places on individual rights masks the multi-party nature of marriage. Can we honestly imagine marriage as a basic civil right of couples rather than a basic civil right of the individual subject?

The Court goes on to reaffirm marriage as a “basic civil right of man” that is “fundamental to our very existence and survival” as they did in Skinner v. Oklahoma, 316 U.S. 535, 541 (1942). Loving at 12. The Court’s construction of marriage is interesting, given how the right to privacy has been contextualized. In other U.S. Supreme Court cases, particularly regarding abortion, we see striking differences in how rights are discussed. On the one hand, abortion rights are classified as penumbra and fundamental rights as in Roe v. Wade 410 U.S. 113 (1973), while the freedom to marry is explicitly called “fundamental.” One major contestation of a woman’s right to an abortion is often regarding whether or not the woman can have individual autonomy of abortion without some consideration for the potential of human life, shifting the argument away from the idea of an individual right towards more of a family consideration and social interest. Marriage is framed differently despite undeniably involving more than one person. The key is that the freedom to marry is defined as a decision: “the freedom to marry, or not marry” Loving at 12, placing more emphasis on the decision to marry than on the act of marriage itself. In Roe, however, the right to an abortion is muddied by extensive concern for the potential mother-child at the expense of the woman’s decision to get an abortion.

¹⁷⁴ The Court does not, however, have a good record of repudiating distinctions between citizens solely because of their ancestry. See, e.g., Plessy v. Ferguson 163 U.S. 537 (1896); Peter H. Schuck & Rogers M. Smith Citizenship Without Consent: Illegal Aliens in the American Polity, generally, for a discussion on various immigration cases and United States birthright citizenship.

However, Loving also teaches us to be mindful of how we examine precedent and how a seemingly good precedent can maintain an oppressive tradition. Despite the Court's seemingly progressive views on race, they construct marriage as "fundamental to existence and survival" enforcing the heterosexual underpinnings of the institution and refusing to incorporate other types of marriages while it simultaneously includes interracial marriages in its marital fold. Marriage as "fundamental to existence and survival" is problematic because it excludes a large portion of American citizens who never married but undoubtedly existed.

Loving v. Virginia was, above all, a fight for heteronormative inclusion. Rather than entertaining the idea of abolishing legal marriage or at least critiquing the problematic and exclusionary aspects of legal marriage, the Lovings, their counsel, and their powerful allies¹⁷⁵ chose, instead, to include interracial couples into the pre-existing institution of marriage. There is a radical difference between fighting for access to and challenging a government-sanctioned institution, between inclusion and eradicating boundaries of exclusion.

One of the most radical and important sections of the Declaration of Independence is in the following passage from the Preamble:

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (U.S. Declaration Ind.).

America's so-called Founding Fathers' break with Great Britain is just as symbolic of the American spirit as the documents that they reproduced after that uncoupling

¹⁷⁵ Id. at 65; See also Loving v. Virginia 318 U.S. at 1 (1967).

delineating the new government—most notably the United States Constitution. In the context of this American spirit, abolishing a part of the government that may be “destructive,” is the right of the people. Even today, few people even contemplate abolishing marriage, and those who do question the possible “destructive” elements or even critique legal marriage are called radical. While Loving was a crucial step in the reformation of an ill-conceived marriage construction, it may not have been the most radical option at that historical moment that was ripe for change.

The Dark, Black Side of Marriage: American Slavery

Why do same-sex marriage advocates rely so heavily on Loving given its focus on integration into the status quo and continued fixation with the individual in the Loving decision’s brief due process analysis? If we accept pro-same-sex marriage advocates’ strategic decision to avoid radical changes in how American government positions the institution of marriage, we are still left to deal with the interracial element of Loving. By positing Loving as one of, if not the most, important cases for same-sex marriage claims, pro-same-sex marriage advocates run the risk of buttressing the myth of gayness as inherently involving or necessarily including whiteness, which can severely hurt the case for same-sex marriage in the black American community. The physical characteristics of the plaintiffs in same-sex marriage cases affirm this idea as well. Most plaintiffs, see, e.g., Goodridge 440 Mass. 309 (2003), are either white or are in a committed relationship with a white partner. If same-sex marriage cannot incorporate black couples, too, is there even a case to be made to black Americans?

Pro-same-sex marriage advocates could have and still can (in the future) avoid the interracial implications of Loving and chose/choose to, instead, use the historic denial of slavery as an important touchstone for the case for same-sex marriage.

While marriage as it relates to slaves will not completely correlate with the denial of marriage to same-sex couples, it may be a useful example to consider. At no other point in American history was the denial of marriage to an “othered” group so popularly accepted as in the denial of marriage to slaves.

Marriage, especially in the American context, has historically been a contested space that has affected racialized, sexualized, and ethnicized groups. The racialization, sexualization, and ethnicization of these groups as “other” and non-beings was a necessary precursor to their denial of legal marriage. Coontz explains, “[t]here was serious question...as to whether slaves, women, the lower classes, Native Americans and the Irish were fully human.”¹⁷⁶ The marriage bar for slaves as it relates to citizenship is distinctly fascinating: “One of the clearest marks of slaves’ status as noncitizens and their lack of civil rights was the denial of legal marriage to slaves; to marry and to be a citizen one had to be able to consent, and slaves had no legal capacity to give or withhold consent.”¹⁷⁷ Denial of legal marriage, then, was a marker of American exclusion and noncitizenship. The effects of such marital as well as citizenry exclusion strained black American families, given the social condition of slavery.

The black slave family was a most precarious social unit, mostly subject to the will of their slave owners.¹⁷⁸ Without legal access to marriage, many slaves still formed committed intimate partnerships, most notably adopting a traditionally African

¹⁷⁶ See *The Way We Never Were* at 48.

¹⁷⁷ See *Public Values and Private Lives: Cott, Davis, and Hartog on the History of Marriage Law in the United States* at 929.

¹⁷⁸ See *American Families*: “slaves thus quickly learned that they had a limited degree of control over the formation and maintenance of their marriages and could not be assured of keeping their children with them.” at 3; *The Way We Never Were*: “[o]ne study of marriages between slaves in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi found that from 1864 to 1866, almost one-third were broken up by the masters.” at 238; *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*: “Unrecognized by law, the most stable slave marriages were all too fragile in their dependence upon the will of the slaveholder.” at 228; and *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*: “Nowhere did slave marriages win legal sanction, and therefore families could be separated with impunity.” at 32.

custom—“jumping the broom”—a ritual that symbolizes new life and commitment.¹⁷⁹

EJ Graff poses the question, “So did slaves marry?” and concludes that:

[i]f marriage is a bond recognized by the rulers’ law, then no, they did not; but if marriage is a bond that two people and their community count as binding, then yes, they certainly did. Slaves were thus married and unmarried at the same time.¹⁸⁰

These couples occupied a space of personal commitment within a socio-political context that devalued and ignored that bond. “Jumping the broom” is merely one counter-narrative to legal marriage; the very conceptualization of family has always and necessarily extended beyond the idea of the traditional nuclear family. Because nuclear families could easily be broken up or prevented from even forming under slavery, it is understandable that blacks would incorporate more related persons into the family unit. Kinship family rather than nuclear family was important and “[t]he family, while it had no legal existence in slavery, was in actuality one of the most important survival mechanisms for the slave.”¹⁸¹ Neither slave marriages, nor, more importantly, slave families were recognized as legal, legitimate, or American despite the fact that America was unthinkable without them.

Same-sex marriage advocates could retain their integrationist legal argument and still include an analysis of slaves’ exclusion from marriage, citizenship, and legitimate family status. If compared with care, non-heterosexuals treatment in American society as it relates to marriage and family status is a fruitful analysis. We encounter difficulties, however, with the denial of citizenship because non-heterosexuals are not, nor have they historically ever been, systematically held in

¹⁷⁹ See [Jumping the Broom: A Black Perspective on Same-Gender Marriage](#) at 13.

¹⁸⁰ See [What is Marriage For?](#) at 19.

¹⁸¹ See [The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South](#) at 78.

physical bondage. Furthermore, while anti-sodomy laws were the norm among states in the U.S., non-heterosexuals were never explicitly considered non- or subhuman by American law; rather, non-heterosexual behavior was criminalized and conceptualized as a disease. Non-heterosexuals have historically been treated as criminal, deviant, and abnormal, however, which makes their place in society, too, more than a matter of the law.

A careful comparative analysis between the denial of legal marriage to slaves and the denial of legal marriage to same-sex couples may allow for a more convincing due process argument under the Fourteenth Amendment. Both slaves and same-sex couples (excluding Massachusetts same-sex couples) were/are denied legal marriage; and their families are denied the socially valued nuclear family structure as well as the numerous tangible rights the American government bestows upon legally married couples. Many slaves were, as EJ Graff explained, married and unmarried at same time and so, too are many same-sex couples who celebrate non-legal marriage and commitment ceremonies, but are prevented from having their relationships recognized more broadly by law. It is also interesting to note that once the marriage bar has been lifted, slaves opted to marry again.¹⁸² Many same-sex couples in Massachusetts who were non-legally married or formally committed in some other counter-marriage manner, decided to get legally married once the marriage bar had been lifted. This means that marriage for them was also civically important as a way to assert themselves as a part of America.

If marriage is conceptualized in the slave context, as a way to assert one's status as a citizen, it is much harder to imply that same-sex couples seeking to marry are seeking to create a new fundamental right—a right to marry someone of the same

¹⁸² See The Way We Never Were: “After emancipation some slaves felt the desire to regularize already long-standing marriages” at 229.

sex. In Loving, the plaintiffs were not seeking a right to marry a person of a different race. More precisely Richard Loving, a white man, was not seeking a right to marry a black woman, Mildred Jeter, and vice-versa. They were seeking a right to choose their marital partners without unnecessarily being regulated by the institutionalized racism of anti-miscegenation laws. The Loving Court placed the burden on the state to justify why a fundamental right had been systematically denied, not on the couple to convince the Court that interracial marriage was a legitimate and deserved legal recognition. With this view in mind, the state should have to provide a compelling argument for exactly why same-sex couples have historically been excluded from legal marriage; instead of being able to play a semantics game that accuses same-sex couples of wanting “special rights” (a right to same-sex marriage), and the court of creating those special rights and legislating from the bench if they find that same-sex couples have been wrongly excluded from marrying.

The Loving strategy has arguably been unsuccessful. The number of state courts that have accepted Loving rationale pales in comparison to the number of state courts that have flat out rejected it in the context of same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage advocates would be wise to at least consider the possibility that Loving cannot neatly coincide with same-sex marriage litigation, and imagine new ways of framing their argument. A focus on denial and exclusion, rather than an overzealous attempt to normalize and integrate non-heterosexuality may be an important first step. A comparative analysis between same-sex marriage exclusion and the marriage ban on slaves and their desire to exert their citizenship after Emancipation may be a useful way to argue that marriage is a part of the inalienable right to happiness.

Going Beyond: Justice, Law, & Mystique

This excess of justice over law and calculation, this overflowing of the unrepresentable over the determinable, cannot and should not serve as an alibi for staying out of juridico-political battles, within an institution or a state, between institutions or states ... one must do so and take it as far as possible, beyond the place we find ourselves and beyond the already identifiable zones of morality, politics, or law, beyond the distinctions between national and international, public and private, and so on.

—Jacques Derrida¹⁸³

LGBTQ marriage advocates could go even further and take the lessons learned from the racialized exclusion of marriage in the United States and recognize how reinforcing marriage and variations of the nuclear family may have detrimental effects on a large amount of the American population. Bart Landry argues:

At no time did ex-slaves falter in their commitment to the two-parent family. All over the South, thousands of couples came forward to legalize their marriages by registering them with the Freedman's Bureau during and immediately following the close of the Civil War. In so doing, ex-slaves demonstrated their commitment to their current spouses as well as to the institution of marriage.¹⁸⁴

What if ex-slaves had not accepted the two-parent family and, instead, challenged the idea of marriage as the fundamental social family unit? How does Landry's assessment of ex-slave legal marriage support after manumission resonate considering the fact that blacks have one of the lowest marriage rates as compared to other racial groups? Did black Americans' conceptions of the family as more than the nuclear and traditional disappear when slavery ended and the marriage ban was lifted? Grandparents, uncles, aunts, and even non-biologically related people have historically

¹⁸³ See Acts of Religion, p. 257.

¹⁸⁴ See Black Working Wives at 24.

been an integral part of black families regardless of the presence or absence of a nuclear and traditional two-parent unit.

American law and mythologized normality have, however, maintained marriage as an important legal and social entity:

Although the family institution is an adaptive one, it is also conservative. That is, it tends to hold to and promote the status quo. As we grow up in a family we see and interpret the world through that family and that portion of society in which it is embedded. As we obtain emotional support and a feeling of security within it, we have a tendency to want to reproduce it as adults.¹⁸⁵

Despite the existence of extended, blended, and other non-traditional, non-nuclear families, marriage is still idealized, ingrained, and reinforced in our society.

Marriage carries with it a certain public identity—with intimate and legal connotations.¹⁸⁶ Intimately, marriage is believed to be the coming together of two individuals as one: “When it comes to most friends and relatives, the two are considered one...they are now seen as a unit, and it is as a pair that the married couple is reacted to in myriad social situations.”¹⁸⁷ Given the American tradition of individualism, framing marriage and two couples as a single individual entity makes perfect sense. Marital status becomes the category by which individuals are socially relevant and “[b]ecause the community has bestowed this public identity, a married couple’s relationship is no longer a private matter.”¹⁸⁸

To adopt legal marriage as an unparalleled way that families are defined and accepted poses problems for non-traditional, non-nuclear families. In a utopian democracy, there is no room for the non-nuclear: “Unity and purity are easily attained

¹⁸⁵ See *Marriage and Family in a Changing Society* at 25.

¹⁸⁶ *Id.*: “Marriage is... (1) the public bestowal of a new identity, and (2) the creation of a new legal unit” at 271.

¹⁸⁷ *Id.*, at 272.

¹⁸⁸ *Id.*

when the basic difficulty is emphatically ignored and when, for formal reasons, everything that contradicts the system is excluded as impure.”¹⁸⁹ In this state of forged American purity, exceptions to the accepted non-nuclear family are denied the protection of the law. The social alienation of “alternate” family types can lead to serious policy ramifications. The famous Moynihan Report on the black family reinforced marriage and two-parent families as the normative and standard American family unit, at the expense of pathologizing the black family, generally, and blaming black mothers for creating children who are not adjusted or ready for American society. The Moynihan Report used the mythical American standard¹⁹⁰—two-parent families that are preferably married—to evaluate the entire black community, despite the historical complexities of the relationship between black Americans and marriage.

The framing of justice is at the root of the alienation of exceptional family formations; it is from that point from which we can begin to address it. Borrowing from Jacques Derrida’s distinction between justice and law and the “mystical foundation of authority,”¹⁹¹ we can argue that law has been mythologized as justice and has, subsequently, clouded the way we approach issues of justice and politics. Derrida writes that “[t]he authority of laws rests only on the credit that is granted them. One believes in it; that is their only foundation.”¹⁹² Same-sex marriage advocates believe in the legal marriage because of the historical credit (benefits, recognition) it has been afforded and, yet, they invoke the rhetoric of justice on the basis of access to an enforceable law (marriage) as if they can touch justice or make it tangible by merely expanding the limits of marriage. However, justice cannot be “touched” so to speak. Returning to Baldwin’s idea of the impossible, “[j]ustice is an

¹⁸⁹ See *Political Theology* at 21.

¹⁹⁰ See Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

¹⁹¹ See *Acts of Religion*, p. 239.

¹⁹² *Id.* at 240.

experience of the impossible: a will, a desire, a demand for justice the structure of which would not be an experience of aporia, would have no chance to be what it is—namely, a just *call* for justice.”¹⁹³ There is no clear endpoint to justice. Justice is an ongoing process and, in that way, it does some of the work that Baldwin’s impossible politics of love does. For both, the potential lies in the impossibility. It is only in demanding the impossible that we can come closer to justice.

Beyond the Homonormative: Transformational Thinking—A New Way to Articulate LGBTQ Politics

Baldwin’s intellectual work covered a vast amount of intellectual terrain and resisted the notion of a stagnant way of thinking. He engaged the intraracial, interracial, heterosexual, as well as homosexual as is exemplified in *Another Country* and *The Fire Next Time* and I would like to suggest that black queer politics is situated at an important junction of racialized and sexualized space that has the potential to broaden the way we think politically. Baldwin’s work flourishes at that intersection, and he carves out a space from which he can articulate an unorthodox politics.

The space of the vernacular lends itself to complex discourses that may arise in transformative politics attuned to intersectionality. For example, statistics show that black Americans, in general, are less likely to get married and conform to the notion of the traditional family; yet, at the same time, black leaders (inside and outside of the pulpit) who inhabit a controlled political space, often promote marriage and/or some variety of moral sexual discipline in the black community as a solution to economic and criminal issues that they assume stem from the family. Also, black culture promotes the heteronormative idea of the two-parent heteronormative household as the

¹⁹³ *Id.* at 244.

ideal environment for children—in which every child needs a “mommy” and “daddy”—so that they will understand men and women (as if these children will not meet other men and women in the world outside of their household), despite the fact that historically, societies existed where women took care of children outside of America’s “traditional” model.

In the spirit of transformational politics, how, then, are gays and lesbians also affected by the dominating rhetorical support for the nuclear family? Aside from making gays and lesbians who do not have children doubly deviant by sexual orientation and family structure (or presumed lack thereof), it also affects gay and lesbian individuals with children. Contrary to popular belief, many gays and lesbians do actually have children, mostly from prior heterosexual relationships, but also from artificial insemination and adoption. The nuclear family framework does not allow for any fluidity of sexuality. Instead, it assumes that heterosexuality is a static nomenclature that is immune to the stain of gay and lesbian persons. Given the larger cultural investment in the nuclear family paradigm, some black non-heterosexuals may reject the nuclear family, but still believe that their children need a significant opposite-sex figure—especially if they are black boys without a father-figure—falling into the trap of stereotypical misconceptions of black masculinity that are rooted in white oppression.

Some work has been done on the part of the mainstream LGBT community to reach out to black religious leaders on the issue of marriage and homosexuality and family more generally, but the nature of this invitation to discourse is often unfairly one-sided. Because the mainstream LGBTQ movement generally avoids serious dialogue about race and white privilege, they re-create spaces of homogenous whiteness. The homonormative continues to support the erasure of other non-white LGBTQ’s and ignores the parts of their identities that are not aligned with

homonormative politics: “[t]here is by now a well-documented history of racism in the lesbian and gay movement in the United States, a racism that has inevitably accompanied these problematic liberal conceptions of subjectivity and the single-issue homogenizations implied in such terms as ‘the gay community’ that these conceptions have generated.”¹⁹⁴

Transformative thinkers reflect on and tease apart power, sexuality, race, class, and gender in non-dichotomized ways—outside of the heterosexual/non-heterosexual binary—and approach political coalitions and imagined communities, space, and “home” with a fresh transformational perspective. On July 26, 2006, a group of pro-LGBT rights activists, scholars, educators, writers, artists, lawyers, journalists, and community organizers released a statement, *Beyond Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families & Relationships*. The *Beyond Marriage* coalition outlined a new transformational strategy that emphasizes coalition building and true solidarity outside of the LGBTQ community and its interests. Sadly, the statement was largely under-discussed, ignored, and/or dismissed by mainstream and powerful homonormative leaders. Is it possible for the LGBTQ rights movement to move from a three-prong hate crime, same-sex marriage, and same-sex joint/second parent adoption focus towards something bigger? As Cathy Cohen puts it, can we “envision a politics where one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades?”¹⁹⁵ Transformational politics would not completely abandon current homonormative political interests; instead, an honest transformational politics would extend those interests beyond the interests of homonormativity to include those at various margins in relation to power, not simply those at the margins of sexuality.

¹⁹⁴ See Barnard, Ian. *Queer Race*, p. 3.

¹⁹⁵ See “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* at 22.

Same-sex marriage advocates should learn from Baldwin's critique of the complexities of the individual and not only be mindful of how reinforcing marriage can affect the livelihood of others, but they should also be open to looking at the broader context of the debate about same-sex marriage. The mainstream LGBTQ movement is, in many ways, quite exclusionary, evidenced by its struggles to address intra race and class issues. If there is a case to be made for same-sex marriage to black Americans, it must be made and accepted, first, by black non-heterosexuals who have membership in both the black and non-heterosexual communities.

The homonormative LGBTQ movement, however, does not have a good track record when it comes to race. As the demographic most disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS has changed from gay white men to black heterosexual women and gay black men, mainstream LGBTQ advocates have reduced funding and legal attention for HIV/AIDS litigation, support networks, and services in favor of a more white inspired political agenda—same-sex marriage. This shift away from AIDS directly effects the black LGBTQ subgroup more than the homonormative.

There is no case for same-sex marriage to be made to the black American community, non-heterosexual and heterosexual alike, if the case does not involve a transformational politics that extends beyond simple challenges to oppression based on sexual orientation. If the mainstream LGBTQ movement wants black American support for same-sex marriage, then they must be able to prove that they are reliable allies in anti-poverty and anti-racism work both within and outside the LGBTQ community. A real commitment to equality will dare to look at the monetary availability for civil rights work and responsibly allocate money for issues other than same-sex marriage, moving *beyond* a rhetorical conceptualization of justice into a space where black experience is not simply used to further the case for same-sex marriage; and, actually incorporates contemporary black voices and perspectives in

setting the political agenda. Black legal scholars such as Cathy Cohen and June Jordan and more vernacular intellectuals such as Reverend Irene Monroe and Mandy Carter need to be taken much more seriously as important figures in the LGBTQ movement who have valuable critiques of the homonormative.

Transformational politics is a complex politics—an honest politics that requires honest and, perhaps, painful dialogue. The homonormative LGBTQ movement, as constructed today, is not transformative. It is deeply invested in continuing the tradition of rewarding people and their families for finding soul mates and living in committed relationships. In reality, however, many Americans are not married, will not marry, or will not remain married. Marriage is a social custom that people choose to put on; surely the “justice” question of our times is not merely wearing same-sex marriage and is not simply discussed in the legal sphere. What I propose is to cease giving priority to the legal and to engage the cultural and the vernacular more intimately. This involves an engagement with religion, morality, queerness, and race in unlikely or alienated vernacular spaces like music, sport, and creative writing who’s perspective can provide a more holistic means for understanding the impossibility and potential of vernacular black queer politics.

A Coda: Passing the Torch to Today's Vernacular Intellectuals

I knew he'd written about me in Souls on Ice, but I hadn't yet read it. Naturally when I did read it, I didn't like what he had to say about me at all...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...but I am an odd quantity. So is Eldridge; so are we all.

—James Baldwin, 1972¹⁹⁶

James Baldwin's response to Eldridge Cleaver's critique and conflation of Baldwin's politics and personal life, illustrates how difficult it is to engage in transformational politics. In what seems to be one of his most shameful moments, Baldwin renders people who identify or are identified with "faggots, punks, and sissies" abject—something he resisted doing in his previous writing.¹⁹⁷ There is, indeed, something quite irrecoverable in Baldwin's retreat. Distancing himself from "those" types of homosexuals, he borders on the homophobic. More interesting, however, is the nature of the gesture to Cleaver afterwards. Baldwin confesses, "but I *am* an odd quantity. So is Eldridge; so are we all," at once distancing himself from normalcy and inviting, naming, and even pulling Cleaver towards an identification with queerness. Whether Eldridge was or had been sexually queer is not something that Baldwin need speculate. Because Cleaver was far from "normal" and queer in the sense of being odd, he was, subsequently, Baldwin's queer brother in opposition to that normalcy. From that gesture, we can re-read Baldwin's abjection as more complicated than meets the eye.

¹⁹⁶ See Baldwin, James. "No Name on the Street," p. 539-540.

¹⁹⁷ See Woubshet, Dagmawi. James Baldwin Class.

In The Fire Next Time Baldwin writes, “I left the church twenty years ago, and I haven’t joined anything since.”¹⁹⁸ Can we, then, logically conceive of Baldwin “joining” the faggots, punks, and sissies? Rather than take up socially constructed identity categories, Baldwin’s phrase “so are we all,” implies the impossibility of normalcy given human complexity. Normalcy is nothing more than a fantasy that creates and prioritizes certain characteristics over others.

Amidst Cleaver’s homophobic readings of and disappointment with Baldwin’s work in Souls on Ice,¹⁹⁹ Cleaver, too, seems to yearn to reconcile with Baldwin. Cleaver claims to understand “his tension between love and hate”²⁰⁰ and faults him with the *manner* in which Baldwin had been, up to that point, writing about racial tensions or, more pointedly, with the manner in which he choose not to write. Cleaver attacks Baldwin for his failure to write a novel about intra-racial intimacy²⁰¹ and fuses Baldwin’s private life and same-sex desire with his intellectual work.

The Baldwin-Cleaver exchange epitomizes the tough road to transformational politics where critiques of heteronormativity and racial inequality exist together. It is interesting that Cleaver critiqued Baldwin’s creative writing as opposed to his essays and, perhaps, that is why Baldwin responded to Cleaver in the manner that he did. For Baldwin and Cleaver, the creative realm is an important site for transformational politics—odd as that may be.

Baldwin sought to share, with Cleaver, his politics of impossibility. The blues deconstructionist, preacher, and vernacular intellectual, James Baldwin, produced a vast amount of sophisticated writing that is useful in imagining black queer politics.

¹⁹⁸ See Baldwin, James. Fire Next Time, p. 70.

¹⁹⁹ Cleaver, Eldridge. Souls on Ice. References to “the womb of Baldwin’s typewriter” (p. 123), Baldwin as “a Pussy Cat (p. 130) and “Sugar” (p. 131), and Baldwin “touching [his] toes” (p. 128).

²⁰⁰ Id, p. 71.

²⁰¹ Go Tell it on the Mountain, Baldwin’s first novel, is completely lost in Cleaver’s critique. Go Tell it on the Mountain is, almost exclusively, filled with black characters.

Other contemporary vernacular intellectuals continue in this tradition and take on the impossible task of articulating a progressive politics that takes sexuality and race into account. Who are the blues singers and deconstructionists of today? Future research will seek to uncover unlikely philosophers of race and sexuality such as Lil' Wayne and untraditional intellectual places such as New Orleans bounce/sissy music as vernacular intellectuals and vernacular spaces with valuable critiques of and philosophies on politics. Baldwin once remarked, "I could say, and they would both understand me: Don't you think Bessie is proud of Aretha?"²⁰² I could say, and they would both understand me: "Don't you think James Baldwin is proud of Weezy?"

²⁰² See Baldwin, James. "Malcolm and Martin," p. 202.

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