VIOLENCE, SUFFERING, AND SOCIAL INTROSPECTION:

James Baldwin's *Another Country*

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Abstract

This research examines and expands on the critical outlook concerning the scope and function of identity in the literature of James Baldwin. Looking at *Another Country* specifically, the essay expounds on the universality of oppressive conditions shown to operate across factors of race, gender, and sexuality. Critical discussion has largely focused on Baldwin's construction of male identities and sexual experiences; this essay argues for the importance of the novel's female psychological depictions and how these character profiles operate in relation to male profiles. A significant universal aspect considered is the visibility of trauma: how its appearance communicates repressed pain and influences an observer's sense of social consciousness and individual introspective capabilities. Furthermore, the trauma and associated psychological conditions are explicitly tied to the characters' races, genders, and sexualities; consequently, critical theory is used in the reading of key passages. Though historical elements of 1960s America will be mentioned in analysis, the scope of the essay will be focused on literary passages from the book and responding to previous scholarly criticism. Three primary themes of emphasis are violence as a prompter for social consciousness, intertwined oppressions, and the function of female characters in the novel.

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

James Baldwin published *Another Country*, his third novel, in 1962, a sprawling work that follows five characters of different races, genders, and sexualities. Though the characters are separated by many noted social boundaries, they suffer through similar bouts of self-doubt, confusion, and repression that affect how intimate spaces are developed for personal relationships. Because Baldwin's portrayals of women came across as particularly rich for a male writer in the 1950s and early 1960s, I was curious to what degree his ability to create a wide range of characters stemmed from his experiences as a bisexual Black man. This curiosity persuaded my eventual decision to focus on the theme of intertwined oppression within the novel. Furthermore, because the plot largely follows the cast as they respond to the suicide of Rufus Scott, a main character, another theme emerged to consider how social consciousness functions in relationship to violence and trauma. My reading approach followed critical theory in literature, which directed my foregrounding of the importance of societal expectations in connection to Rufus's suicide and the other characters' trauma.

Figure 1. Photo of Baldwin taken by Allan Warren (London, 1969).

Many scholars have written about how Rufus is driven to suicide because of his struggle to come to terms with his bisexual identity, which is compounded by being Black in America. My research sought to enrich this intersectional understanding by considering how the character's

self-destruction through racism and homophobia could be connected to Baldwin's female characters, specifically Ida Scott and Cass Selenski, and their handling of gendered oppression. Many previous interpretations of Baldwin's literature were reviewed during the research period, and I found identity to be the most relevant theme concerning Baldwin scholarship, which falls in line with my reading of the novel. Many writers have emphasized the author's construction of male sexuality and depictions of queer men in America, but this view has led to a weaker conversation on the representation of women in his novels; this is a key area where my essay expands on the critical discussion by focusing on the development and function of female characters in the novel. Though women characters aren't developed with repressed queer sexual desires, a common theme for Baldwin's men, they command roughly half of *Another Country*'s characters and play important roles. This stance is developed through three segments that address the following aspects of *Another Country*: the role of violence, how oppressive forces are functionally intertwined, and, finally, how gendered oppression is shown to impact female consciousness.

VIOLENCE AS A PROMPTER

A major plot device is the surprising death of Rufus Scott, a young musician driven to suicide early in the novel. The reader knows that Rufus's death was motivated in part because of the character's trauma associated with racism and repressed bisexuality, but we are made to follow along as the remaining cast attempts to account for their roles in the suicide. For this analysis segment, the central issue is how suffering and loss of life can function to communicate otherwise hidden traumatic burdens. From another angle, how do individuals respond to trauma made visible? For example, Rufus's sister, Ida, blames his friends, particularly because she believes that their Whiteness prevented them from recognizing his anguish that stemmed from racism. Significantly, Ida herself is unable to respond to Rufus's bisexual identity. This discordance will be explored further in a later segment, but it is important to keep in mind when considering how effectively trauma can be communicated and expressed.

An initial conversation worth noting occurs after Cass, a friend of Rufus, and Richard, her husband, learn of Rufus's death. Richard openly acknowledges his dislike of Rufus, particularly because of his abusive behavior toward Leona, Rufus's girlfriend. Cass responds by saying, "I wasn't trying to justify it. It can't be justified. *But*

Figure 2. The novel's themes of identity are both illustrated and emphasized with an internationally published cover.

now I think—oh, I just don't know enough to be able to judge him. He must—he must have been in great pain” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 107, my emphasis). Cass vocalizes the revealing nature of Rufus's death and how she is just beginning to realize what the reader is already aware of. Rufus's death also prompts Cass to reflect on her own suffering as her conversation continues; she tells Richard that they have hurt each other in their relationship, and we are left with her thoughts:

She had said No, many times, to many things, when she knew she might have said Yes, because of Richard; believed many things, because of Richard, which she was not sure she really believed. He had been absolutely necessary to her—or so she had believed; it came to the same thing—and so she had attached herself to him and her life had taken shape around him. . . . She did not regret it for herself, *and yet she began to wonder* if there was not something in it to be regretted. (Baldwin, 1993, pp. 107–108, my emphasis)

Cass begins questioning the dimensions of her relationship, which represents an early transformation for the character and a step toward deeper introspection. It appears that her self-knowledge shares an intimate space with the knowledge she has gained about Rufus; after Rufus's pain has been rendered undeniably apparent, Cass begins to slowly peel back the layers of her own repressed identity. This is a huge element of *Another Country* for all the characters, and Ernesto Javier Martínez clarifies this theme in stating that “*Another Country* is preoccupied with incoherence and confusion as epistemically significant states and needs to be read as an extended meditation on the peculiar difficulty of gaining self-knowledge in oppressive social contexts” (2009, p. 783). Keeping this “peculiar difficulty” in mind, one can possibly begin to understand how death is able to effectively illuminate pains that were previously hidden and repressed because of associated societal oppressions. Everything isn’t left entirely tragic, though, because the novel attempts to posit how collaborative love and communication can break down barriers of identity.

INTERTWINED OPPRESSIONS

As was mentioned earlier, an incredible amount of critical attention is given to the construction of identity in Baldwin’s work. For this essay, emphasis is placed on teasing out how conflicts of racial, sexual, and gendered oppressions get tied together and uniquely experienced by individual characters. Though oppression in terms of intersectionality has been touched on by many scholars, prior Baldwin scholarship usually focused largely on how male characters dealt with repressed sexual desires. By straying from this tendency, this essay segment illuminates how the characters’ separate obstacles actually inform common experiences when examined together. Cora Kaplan illustrates this bridging of experience in a separate manner through reader-response analysis:

Through an engagement with Baldwin’s fiction and essays, with their ethical and transgressive elements focused in narratives of revised masculinity and rewritten relations between blacks and whites, a wide range of women readers of the fifties and sixties could reach beyond their own subaltern inscriptions in dominant sexuality and culture, acknowledging both directly and through analogy other scenes of social and sexual desire—“variant” lives of all kinds. (Kaplan, 1996, p. 33)

Figure 3. Intersectionality is a framework closely related to the theme of intertwined oppressions. An intersectional perspective seeks to treat various social aspects of identity, both visible and invisible, as interconnected rather than separate.

Kaplan’s nod to “variant lives” helps to frame how transgressive behavior is rendered particularly visible for members of discriminated populations. This idea is shown in the novel with one of the characters, Eric, a White bisexual man, as he recalls how his childhood was rife with racism and homophobia. Remarkably, Eric is developed as the most self-assured character, and this can be related to his past, where he was put in a position to empathize with Black individuals who had to live with racism in the American South. Baldwin, by utilizing flashbacks for these revelations, invites the reader to reflect on the foundational importance of these scenes without explicitly stating the case.

Eric’s home, a central domestic space, included Black caretakers, which allowed an initial environment for his racial worldview to develop; Blacks were an extension of the family, and a passage reads, “He had loved the cook, a black woman named Grace, who fed him and spanked him and scolded and coddled him, and dried the tears which scarcely anyone else in the household ever saw” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 197). From a young age Eric was aware of the racial divide in society (p. 198), but this knowledge was affected by the fact that his identity was becoming something that needed to be kept hidden (p. 199). His interest in cross-dressing was something kept to himself, being vaguely aware of the habit’s transgressive nature, and in this way we see Eric becoming

identified with the “variant lives” mentioned prior by Kaplan. By the time Eric becomes a teenager, he is aware of the social expectation to discriminate by race, but he is also aware of the discrimination he stands to face because of his sexual identity. The two socially enforced ideals are equally rejected in Eric’s relationship with LeRoy, a Black teenager. Their relationship is an initial mold that prefigures Eric and Rufus’s relationship but diverges because there are separate sources of repression. Whereas Rufus couldn’t come to terms with their relationship because of his own self-conscious guilt and sexual anxieties, LeRoy wishes to avoid Eric because of racial tensions and the risks he faces as a Black man in a small southern town.

With this initial relationship between Eric and LeRoy, Eric seems willing to bypass issues of sexuality and, further to the point, race because of his previous relationship with Black caretakers. For example, though Eric struggles to face insults levied by White teenagers who notice his attraction to LeRoy (Baldwin, 1993), he recovers nonetheless and says “‘you’re not a nigger, not for me, you’re LeRoy, you’re my friend, and I love you’” (p. 205). Furthermore, when Eric is reflecting on their relationship, he thinks, “He was frightened and in pain and the boy who held him so relentlessly was suddenly a stranger; and yet this stranger worked in Eric an eternal, a healing transformation” (p. 206). This declaration of healing love reveals how Eric is able to stand apart from the other characters and how that healing is intimately linked to the oppressive forces of society. Taking the reflection as a whole, Susan Feldman emphasizes how “Eric willingly confronts his repressed past and brings it into the open” (2000, p. 98). Unlike other characters, Eric is able to clearly think back to essential moments that first made him aware of how his identity rejected the wider values of his community. This introspection is something that centrally sets him apart from the rest of the cast and allows him to make positive impacts on individuals such as Cass and Vivaldo, Rufus’s main friend in the novel, as they attempt to better understand their own identities.

BALDWIN’S FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THEIR SOCIAL AWARENESS

The previous two segments coalesce and create a space to fully appreciate how Baldwin’s female characters find their footing in *Another Country*. The author’s handling of masculine sexuality has dictated the general flow of critical discourse surrounding his works, which is unsurprising given his position as a notable bisexual author; that identity, with the

associated lived experiences, lends credence to his particular vision of masculine sexuality. With all this being said, acknowledgment should still be given for Baldwin’s ability to extend outside of the sphere of masculinity in this novel. While Leona, though a fleshed-out character in her own right, is in a secondary role, Cass and Ida stand out as significant figures in the plot, and the three characters contribute central activity to the novel. Returning to Cora Kaplan, her critical reading of the novel offers appreciation for the female characters’ development, but it is still qualified through masculinity:

The female body worked over and overworked by ideology . . . is represented with great sympathy and poignancy in *Another Country* by Ida, who thinks all white men see her as a whore; by Leona, abused by husband, lover, and brothers; by Cass, who panders to her husband’s febrile vanities. And while at least two of these characters, Ida and Cass, may live to change as well as challenge these inscriptions, Baldwin’s central project is not to ‘retool’ femininity. . . . Women are, like Eve, the bearers of important but bitter knowledge for men, not the agents or vehicles of hope. (Kaplan, 1996, p. 33)

Though Baldwin’s construction and acknowledgment of women’s unique struggles is complimented, Kaplan goes on to read their roles as primarily useful in furthering his examination of masculinity. This commentary is indicative of the qualified acknowledgment that many critics make, which mistakenly minimizes Baldwin’s scripting of his female characters. Much of this is due to the lack of a blatant question of sexuality for the female characters to face, which is interesting in its own right, but as Kaplan notes, Baldwin effectively recognizes the setbacks that women face in a patriarchal society. Accordingly, their conscious response to misogyny, as a unique form of gendered oppression, should be analyzed much in the same way we see scholars scrutinize how Baldwin’s men face homophobia and specific masculine expectations.

The issue of gendered oppression from a woman’s vantage is broached between Cass and Richard during a continuation of their conversation discussion in the first segment. After Cass makes a statement about women being able to read past the posturing that some men prop up, Richard dismisses her sentiment as “something women have dreamed up”; she responds with ridicule, saying “‘Something women have dreamed up. But I can’t say that—what men have “dreamed up” is all there is, the world they’ve dreamed up is the

Figure 4. Photo of the historically significant Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village gay bar, taken by Diana Davies. The Stonewall was the site of 1969 Stonewall riots, and on the wall is written “We homosexuals plead with our people to please help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of the Village—Mattachine.”

world” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 108). Cass is initially characterized as satisfied—content to be the mother of the house and a dedicated wife who married her first love—but the combination of Rufus’s death and Richard’s success as a writer spurs her to see the lack of personal achievement in her life. Later she confesses to Vivaldo, “I sit in that house like—like a housekeeper. I take care of the kids and make meals and scrub toilet bowls and answer the phone and he just—doesn’t see me. He’s always *working*” (p. 274). In a conversation with Eric she says “Great men’s wives, indeed! . . . How I’d love to explode *that* literary myth” (p. 235). All of these exclamations mirror the feeling that many American women would echo as the 1960s progressed, with Cass evolving to become disillusioned with the second-rate status she is expected to occupy as wife to a successful husband.

Cass’s growth in reflective capabilities stands in contrast to critics who only look at masculinity for psychological strife in Baldwin’s writing. Stanley Macebuh reads Cass’s growth as largely inconsequential, saying “it needs to be emphasized that if Cass does aspire to membership in Baldwin’s new country, it is only in a provisional sense, in terms, that is, of her discovery that Rufus, Vivaldo, and Eric belong to a world whose reality is more desperate and harrowing than the one she inhabits” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 94). His reading and resultant grouping of the three bisexual men together stresses the importance of masculine sexuality at the expense of how race and, more relevantly, gender function for the novel. Though Cass does have privileges through class, Whiteness, and heterosexuality, she is still driven to risk her family life later in the novel while in an adulterous relationship.

Returning briefly to sentiments expressed through Ernesto Javier Martínez’s analysis, Cass risks something of a psychological suicide through her adulterous relationship with Eric. In a violent confrontation with Richard, she attempts to confess and by way of explanation says that Eric had “a sense of himself” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 374), something that Cass desires to obtain for herself. Through her affair and concluding fight with Richard, it is revealed that Cass suffers with the same conflicting issue of personal identity that the other characters face. She has to contend with the dissatisfaction that she has previously repressed in order to function within a family structure that was expected from women of her time. Taking this information alongside frustrations about a lack of opportunity or direction to have a career like Richard, Baldwin attempts to represent the psychological strain that women might develop within a patriarchally constraining environment.

Finally, too many critics emphasize Ida’s role in shaping other characters rather than highlighting her weight as a fully fleshed-out character. Trudier Harris says that “though she has a recognizable presence, she is more a medium, a vehicle for the memory of Rufus and the medium through which the whites can exorcise their guilt for having somehow failed Rufus” (1985, p. 100). This stance minimizes the work that goes into fleshing out her character and how her conversations contribute to the themes concerning sexuality and gender discrimination. Concerning her relationship to Rufus, consider her inability to come to terms with his sexuality. She says of Eric’s relationship with Rufus, “He wanted a roll in the hay with my brother, too. . . . He wanted to make him as sick as he is” (p. 323). Ida condemns

Figure 5. Women hold banners while marching in Washington, D.C., August 26, 1970.

the other characters for not knowing her brother well enough, but Rufus's bisexuality is not something she is able to accept. In reality, she is just as guilty as the other characters whom she sets out to criticize; this perspective flaw helps establish her as separate from her brother and contributes to the curation of a challenging but believable character.

Attention is also given to Ida's experiences as a Black woman and how that strains her relationship with Vivaldo. Similar to Cass, Ida risks destroying her relationship with Vivaldo when she confesses her affair with another man, saying,

I used to see the way white men watched me, like dogs. And I thought about what I could do to them. How I hated them, the way they looked, and the things they'd say, all dressed up in their damn white skin, and their clothes just so, and their little, weak, white pricks jumping in their drawers. You could do any damn thing with them if you just led them along, because they wanted to do something dirty and they knew that you knew how. (Baldwin, 1993, pp. 418–419)

Exotification is an issue unique to Ida's character and compounds her identity as a Black women, especially as she is in a relationship with a White man. Unlike Cass, Ida has been aware of racial barriers from an early age, making her hyperaware of how White people may view her. At one point she refers to Cass as "the biggest, coolest, hardest whore around" (Baldwin, 1993, p. 347), exemplifying her conflicted self-image and potential self-degradation. Interestingly, it seems that because Ida has lived life

more aware of these issues while Cass is only just becoming more aware, Ida's personal trajectory is plotted with a more positive outlook. Her relationship to Vivaldo, while left somewhat ambiguous, ultimately has healing potential. The hopeful outlook contributes to the novel's lasting impression, because Ida is finally able to fully open up to Vivaldo about the racial and gendered barriers that have kept them from knowing each other fully.

CONCLUSION

Another Country is a deeply complicated, sometimes seemingly impenetrable literary work about personal identity in society. Overall, this research can be utilized to inform future studies into Baldwin's literary works, because a lot still stands to be said for his construction of women and what that says about other male authors of his time. For example, work can be done to stand the function and depiction of women in Baldwin's literature up against other African American male writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Furthermore, this inquiry into Baldwin's literary standing situates a foundation for further research into the author's legacy and literary influence for African American female writers who have noted his impact on their writing, with Toni Morrison and Alice Walker being two examples.

Another Country is an exemplary novel to approach when considering how intersectionality can be found in cultural works that precede our societal understanding of the interconnected system of discrimination. Especially when considering how the novel represents an early attempt to depict intersectionality in literature, more can be said for how different forms of oppression intersect in the novel. This research project used that theme in conjunction with a reading that focused a lot on patriarchal oppression, but more Baldwin novels can be consulted to see how this intertwining of oppressions comes to light through the author's oeuvre. Potentially, the topic could be combined with an archival, historical focus to see how Baldwin's literature is representative of the period that helped produce it. *Another Country* subtly precedes the late 1960s, when much greater interest was being directed toward political issues of sexuality and gender alongside the continued push for racial equality. Overall, this essay contributes to and expands on the conversation surrounding Baldwin's politics of identity and can underpin future work with the author.

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